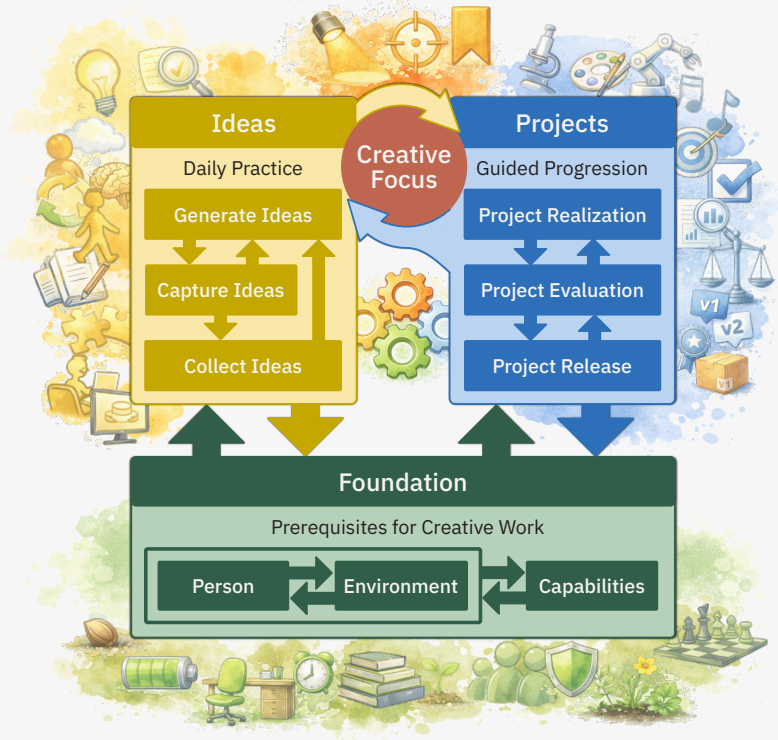
THIRD — COMPLETELY REVISED — EDITION

ORGANIZING CREATIVITY

A Practical System for Deliberately Creating New and Useful Work



Daniel Wessel

Third — completely revised — Edition

ORGANIZING **CREATIVITY**

A Practical System for
Deliberately Creating New and Useful Work

Daniel Wessel

Method and Scope: This is a practical book about how creative work can be organized so that more new and useful things actually get made. It is not a scientific monograph and does not aim to review the creativity literature exhaustively. See Sources and Foundations on page 249 for more information.

This book assumes that creative work needs freedom, but that freedom alone is not enough. What is made still has to answer to standards — of usefulness, beauty, truth, craft, responsibility, and excellence. It is a framework for judgment, not a substitute for it.

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Cite as: Wessel, D. (2026). *Organizing Creativity (Ed. 3.0).* https://www.organizingcreativity.com/OC3

For my late father,
Karl-Heinz Wessel.
I am proud of what you did in life,
and I miss you now that you are gone.

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Why Organize Creativity

> «A truly good book teaches me better than to read it.
> I must soon lay it down, and commence living on its hint ...
> What I began by reading, I must finish by acting.»
>
> *Henry David Thoreau*

The information and tools needed to deliberately create new and useful work are widely available. Yet few people realize creative projects that take more than a few days to complete. Instead, they let ideas die, leave solvable problems unsolved, and watch their potential slowly fade.

No wonder — real creativity is hard, and it always will be. It requires knowledge and skill, motivation and persistence, time and effort. And it requires something that is often falsely seen as anathema to creativity — organization.

As the gap between imagination and realization is usually wide, it takes more than a single idea to realize a creative project. For example, to write a book, a plot idea is not enough. You also need ideas for characters, setting, objects, dialogue, and much more. It is also very easy to get distracted or demotivated. You need organization to stay on course and avoid being sidetracked or frustrated by dead ends.

Because creativity is possible in many different domains — e.g., science, art, private projects, or even relationships — supporting it is highly individual. There is no silver bullet and no one-size-fits-all solution.

Many hacks work in some areas and for some people, but fail in others or even make things worse. Creativity techniques do not work well when the foundation is missing — for example, when domain knowledge is lacking or the environment obstructs progress. Lists of productivity steps fail when one step cannot be applied, but the next step depends

on it. For the same reason, simply copying what creative people do or use often fails, even if you admire them and really *want* it to work.

The good news is that we all already organize our creativity in one form or another — we are just usually not aware of it. Whether you designed it consciously or not, your system determines what you notice, capture, develop, lose, and finish.

So instead of providing tips or hacks that may or may not work, this book builds on your existing system. It provides a general framework that covers the whole process: Foundation, Ideas, Creative Focus, and the implementation of Creative Projects. The framework helps you see how your current system behaves — it makes it visible and therefore changeable. If you notice something you want to improve, you can test that change using the Supplemental Materials (see page 45). The goal is not to install a new system, but to iteratively improve the one that is already shaping your work.

Consequently, this framework argues for creative autonomy and requires it. It provides a map of what matters in creative work and of the principles underneath it. You bring the judgment and the responsibility to test what works for you. On this basis it helps you to understand how your creativity works — what you need in order to be creative, and how to improve both the quality and the quantity of your work.

Creativity as a System

> «The most successful scientist thinks like a poet ...
> and works like a bookkeeper.»
>
> *E. O. Wilson*

The next three chapters establish the conceptual basis of this book. They explain what creativity means here, how the creative system is structured, and how to work with that structure in practice. Together, they present creative work as something that can be defined, structured, diagnosed, and improved.

The chapter on **Creativity** first defines creativity as the deliberate creation of something new and useful, explains its elements, examines its costs and benefits, and shows how to improve one's odds. **Creative System** then introduces the framework and shows how it maps onto your own creative work. **Application** explains how to make that system visible, diagnose where it works or fails, and improve it through small, testable trials. A short **Supplemental Materials** Guide then explains how the supplemental materials support this process.

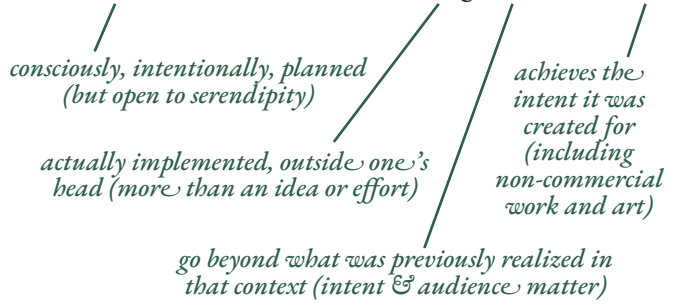
You will get the most out of these chapters if you read them with your own creative process in mind. Notice where you are already doing these things, where the work moves well, and where it stalls. Resist the urge to change everything at once. First use the framework to see what is actually going on.

By the end of this part, you should know what this book means by creativity, be able to locate your own work within the framework, identify likely underflow, overflow, or system-drag problems, and begin making small, testable adjustments.

Creativity

| kriei'tiviti |

the deliberate creation of something new and useful



Chapter 1: Creativity

«Welcome to the world of tomorrow.
A greater world. A better world.»
«Captain America»

Defining Creativity

In this book, **creativity** is defined as **the deliberate creation of something new and useful**. This means:

- **deliberate:** You have an intention to create something.
- **creation:** You make something that exists outside your head and can be experienced or evaluated. It is externalized, structured output, finished or shippable work, or completed projects — not pure thought. This is required to see whether it works as intended.[1]
- **something:** Work, whether physical or immaterial, as long as it is externalized. For example, products, artifacts, theories, models, plays, improv performances, or music.
- **new:** It was not previously realized *within the relevant context*, which *depends on intention and audience*. For example, in a domain such as science or engineering, it must not have existed before — a very high bar. In a relationship, e.g., planning a romantic evening, it is sufficient that it is new within that relationship, i.e., new to the person.[2]
- **useful:** It has value — including non-commercial or artistic value. This value can be the original intention for which it was created, or value that emerges during the process of creating it. This also implies that an audience understands and can use it, though that audience may also be a future one (see Who Judges Creativity on page 15).[3]

This definition includes a wide range of creative work — scientific discoveries, engineering, art, business, creative gifts for a partner or friend, and much more. The time from initial idea to realized project can range from a few minutes (e.g., spontaneously arranging flowers in a certain way) to decades (e.g., the Large Hadron Collider). The costs can range from virtually free (e.g., picking flowers) to extremely expensive (e.g., a mission to Mars).

Deliberate does include accidental or serendipitous discoveries, happy accidents, associative drift, emergent creativity, and productive play. These can all be important starting points and are closely related to ideation, but they are not sufficient on their own. Usually, a deliberate effort is still needed — for example, to understand what was found or to turn it into something usable.[4] Likewise, **newness** can include incremental advances, transformations, reinterpretations, parody, and radical paradigm shifts.

Some activities fall outside this definition because they do not produce externalized artifacts. Play (not deliberate) and having ideas (no creation) are important parts of the creative process, but not sufficient on their own. Similarly, copying or criticizing (not new), and madness or eccentricity for its own sake (not useful)[5] are excluded. This also means that mediocre but existing work is more creative than unexecuted masterpieces. And that neither a profound but unrealized internal breakthrough nor a brilliant process with no output counts as creative. That is intentional — creativity is not only thinking, it is realized work.

Overall, this definition is closer to craft traditions. It makes creativity production-oriented and behavior-based. It is something we do, something that leaves traces — not something we claim to be.[6]

Because this definition focuses on realized, behavior-based work, it dissolves a great deal of self-deception and makes

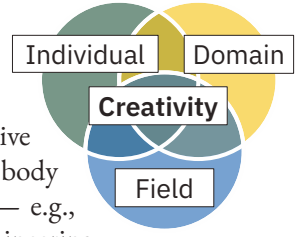
improvement testable — change behavior and observe the output. This production includes the foundation, ideas, creative focus, and project work. That is why this book and its supplemental materials focus on adjusting behaviors and systems rather than cultivating traits or inspiration. It is also why the following chapters examine the structure that already exists in your work, and how small changes to it can be tested.

While this may appear outcome-oriented, it is concerned with the practical consequences of trying to improve your creative system — **increasing the quality and quantity of the new and useful things that are deliberately created.** That is the criterion against which any change is ultimately measured: **Is there a sustained increase in realized, functioning artifacts under real conditions?**

Who Judges Creativity

The terms **new** and **useful** are judgments. This raises the question: Who makes them?

A model proposed by Csikszentmihalyi provides useful guidance here.[7] According to it, creativity happens in the interaction between



- the **individual:** the person who is doing the work — e.g., you or your team,
- the **domain:** where the creative work is situated, the structured body of prior work and standards — e.g., science and its subdomains, engineering, business, art, specific social groups, or the interpersonal level for creative gifts, and
- the **field:** those who evaluate the work regarding newness and usefulness, and often determine recognition.[8] Sometimes the field also controls access to resources, such as

grant money, or to distribution channels, such as galleries or scientific journals. In this book, the field is the target group or its gatekeepers, e.g., the professional community in science, small groups, a single person, or even just yourself.

Because creativity is determined within this interaction, it does not depend on a single factor, nor is it fixed. Individual, domain, and field all help determine whether something counts as creative, and all three can change over time.

For example, we often think of specific people as creative — Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Edison, Nikola Tesla, or Vincent van Gogh. And rightly so — they deserve recognition as inventors and artists of the highest order.

However, this view tends to ignore the environment in which they lived and worked — the available knowledge and technology, the infrastructure, the influence of other people, the zeitgeist, and the state of the domain itself, e.g., the open questions, materials, and pressures they had to work with. One way to see this is in **parallel creativity**, when multiple people independently develop the same thing (e.g., both Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace independently developed the theory of evolution by natural selection).

The field that judges the work can also change. For example, during his lifetime van Gogh's paintings were not regarded as creative and he sold only one. Now they are loved by millions. The judgment of the field changed.[9]

Domains and fields vary widely — in size, structure, methods, materials, openness, visibility, and internal standards. They also determine which modes of being creative are valued and which are not.

Compare, for example, a research scientist writing a scientific article after a year of experiments with an improviser performing live on stage (e.g., improv theater). Both are creative, but they work in very different worlds. The scientist has enor-

mous time flexibility, long feedback cycles, papers as stable artifacts, revision upon revision, and supportive external memory with notes, drafts, and statistical analyses. The improviser has immediate time pressure, dense sensory feedback, no ability to revise, no persistence of the artifact, and a live audience whose energy changes everything. Thus, the domain and field afford very different forms of thinking, making, imagining, and deciding. They determine what is correct, what is rewarded and punished, and what works and what does not.

This means that the affordances of domain and field shape your ability to do creative work. You need to know the domain — for example, psychology, or one of its subdomains — in order to determine which problems are worth solving, to have material to work with, and to notice when you have created something genuinely new. You also need to consider the field, because those in it determine what counts as useful and therefore whether your contribution is valued. And your own way of thinking, making, imagining, and deciding must fit both.

Even within the same domain, the field can differ depending on what you create. If you write a scientific paper, the field consists mainly of other scientists — especially editors and peer reviewers — who determine journal acceptance. If you write a popular-science book, editors are usually the key gatekeepers. If you self-publish — books, blog posts, or online videos — the public itself becomes the field, without intermediaries. Scientific papers require more rigor, but the others can generate far more visibility.

Because many problems do not fit neatly into disciplinary silos, important creative solutions often emerge from the interplay of different domains, i.e., interdisciplinary work. However, because multiple fields are involved, recognition is often harder. Each field applies its own quality standards and may be confused by the material of the other domains.

These three aspects — individual, domain, and field — are examined more deeply in the Foundation part of the book — the individual in Person, the field in Environment, and the domain in Capabilities.

Costs and Benefits of Being Creative

Creativity is not inherently beneficial to the creative person. It takes a great deal of time and effort to learn a domain and realize projects, often under conditions of frustration and uncertainty — for example during creative droughts or when you have to «*embrace the suck*». In some areas, you also face open resistance, ostracism, or personal danger — from people threatened by change or by different points of view. In some cases, the dangers are inherent to the domain itself — think of Marie Curie's radiation experiments.

Creativity is also **value-neutral**. It can be used for benign goals — enlarging our options, improving the world, or simply making life a little better. But it is not limited to these ends, and creative work is not always used for benign purposes. For example, addictive systems or terrorist attacks can be new and useful for *their creators'* purposes.[10] Because the work itself cannot bear responsibility for the ends, means, and consequences, the ethical responsibility falls on the creative person.

So there is a serious responsibility in what you create and how you create it, and that responsibility cannot be delegated away. As Yeats put it, «*In dreams begin responsibilities.*» This includes the problems you choose to solve, how you test whether your work actually functions as intended, and its side effects and long-term consequences. While that responsibility applies especially strongly in scientific research and product development, it extends all the way down to one-on-one interactions. Even gifts come with obligations and change relationships. And unfortunately, good intentions do not

protect against ethical failure. On the contrary, they are often used to evade ethical scrutiny.[11]

Finally, while you can increase the likelihood of successful creative projects, creative work always carries the possibility of failure. Nobody can guarantee success. Even if everything works out, someone else may beat you to it (Parallel Creativity), or the field may change. Creative work is high investment and high risk — with no guaranteed return, and with the real possibility that even hard-working, talented people fail to make a meaningful impact.

Still, if you are willing to bear the costs, creative work can provide meaning, satisfy the creative urge, create a sense of accomplishment, bring fun, and sometimes even fame or fortune. It also gives you the chance to use your full powers — knowledge, imagination, skill — in pursuit of something difficult and worthwhile.

Few things are more satisfying.

Changing the Cost-Benefit Ratio

The costs and benefits of creative work are not fixed. We can change the conditions under which creative work is attempted. And creative people have always tried to shift the balance in their favor, usually by organizing their work and improving the infrastructure around it.

Thomas Alva Edison, for example, was not merely a solitary inventor. He also led an industrial research lab — an organized approach to technological innovation. Scientists write down ideas, flesh them out, and document progress, because the work is too complex to rely on memory. Even many «*accidental*» discoveries were only possible because the work was done with enough organization and care for something unexpected to stand out. Writers use outlines to make writing manageable. Painters sketch. Even artistic inspiration

and scientific insight benefit from organization — not because they can be organized directly, but because favorable conditions for them can be created. On a smaller scale, even surprising someone with a gift often becomes better when the idea is captured and worked on.

So science, engineering, art, inspiration, insight, and small creative projects all benefit immensely from good organization. It makes serious creative work possible and raises its quality level.

Because creative work involves so much more than capturing ideas or structuring tasks, the next chapter introduces the broader framework that approaches creativity in a more holistic way.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter1

Chapter 2: Creative System

> «A process cannot be understood by stopping it. Understanding must move with the flow of the process, must join it and flow with it.»
>
> *«Dune» by Frank Herbert*

Discussions of creativity usually focus on the person — e.g., talent, inspiration, or discipline. But if the goal is to improve creative work, it is more useful to see creativity as a system.

You already have a creative system, whether you designed it consciously or not. It shapes what you notice, what you capture, what develops, what gets lost, and what actually becomes finished work.

Figure 1 on the following page shows the invariant areas and elements of that system.

This framework may seem abstract at first, but it captures the structure of your own creative process:

- **Foundation:** As a **person**, you have certain attributes, interests, skills, limits, and tolerances, and you want to do something with them. These both influence and are influenced by your **environment** — your infrastructure, tools, social support, and what the environment affords or discourages. Together, person and environment determine your **capabilities** — what can be executed or developed at a given time.
- **Ideas:** To deliberately create something new and useful — that is, to be creative — you need ideas. And because creative projects require more than a single idea, ideas have to be **generated**, **captured**, or they are forgotten, and **collected**, i.e., stored in a usable way, so they are accessible when needed.

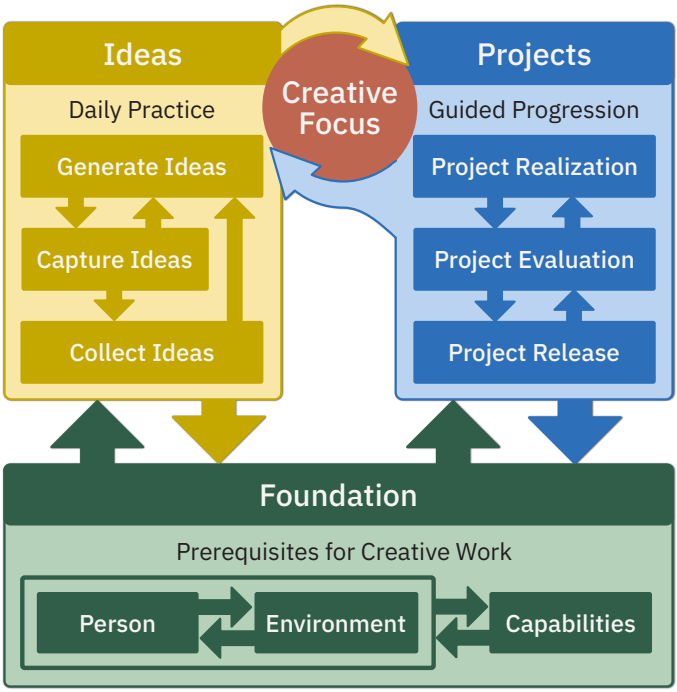


Figure 1: Organizing Creativity Framework.

- **Creative Focus:** Because time and energy are limited, creative focus has to be directed — long-term (**Creative Direction**) and toward specific projects (**Creative Energy**). Sometimes several possible projects have potential, which requires prioritization and a decision to commit (**Creative Commitment**).
- **Projects:** Once you begin **realizing** a project, you will usually need additional ideas, because there is a gap between imagination and reality, and unforeseen problems arise. Thus, projects link back to idea generation. The project itself is **evaluated** — by yourself and often by others — in order to improve it. And then, if it is good enough, it is **released** and made public. That release can provide fur-

ther information and inform future iterations and projects.

Thus, the framework is not something new that you build or impose. It is something you can map onto what you already do. Because it focuses on the invariant aspects of creativity — the topology — it is universal. The stakes and scopes may differ enormously, and the concrete forms vary, but the areas and elements remain the same. This makes your creative process visible across domains, whether in scientific discovery, art, engineering, design, relationships, or everyday creativity (see Table 1 and Table 2).

Throughput

Creative systems behave like flow systems. Ideas enter, attention processes them, and projects leave the system as finished work. A balanced, mostly frictionless creative system is needed in order to achieve high **throughput** — to deliberately create new and useful things in high quality and quantity. Ideally, most friction should come from the work itself, not from avoidable problems in the system around it.

Because the areas and elements of the framework are connected and also loop back into each other, the creative system is more complicated than a simple linear «*input* → *throughput* → *output*» model. For example, realizing a project usually requires additional ideas, and pursuing an idea may require further skill development. Still, attention, time, and effort enter the system and flow through it. And how well that flow happens determines how well you can create.

Thus, organizing creativity means **improving the throughput of ideas into finished creative projects by adjusting the structures that shape the creative system**.

	Science	Art	Relationship	Everyday
Examples	research in physics or psychology	painting, sculpture	a romantic evening, a trip together	a flower bouquet, rearranging a room
		Foundation		
Person	interest in a domain, subject knowledge, research skill	artistic vision, aesthetic sensibility, craft skill	interest in the partner, social attunement, relational knowledge	desire to improve everyday life, aesthetic sensibility, practical judgment
Environment	access to literature, equipment, funding, institutional support	materials, workspace, time, artistic milieu	partner availability, shared history, time, budget, setting	available materials, domestic setting, time, season, access to objects or nature
Capabilities	can formulate questions, design studies, run analyses, and learn what is needed	can work with materials, technique, composition, and revision	can plan, coordinate, anticipate preferences, and adjust in real time	can arrange, combine, adapt, and execute with available means
		Ideas		
Generate	generate research questions, hypotheses, and possible methods	generate motifs, forms, themes, or variations	generate ideas for gestures, activities, timing, and atmosphere	generate ideas for arrangements, improve-ments, or combinations
Capture	notes, lab book, drafts, annotated papers	sketches, notes, studies, fragments	notes, messages to self, reminders	quick notes, photos, memory aids, rough trials
Collect	organized notes, literature system, outlines, data, conceptual clusters	sketchbooks, reference folders, theme-based collections	saved ideas, plans, preferences, remembered successes	remembered patterns, saved examples, reusable combinations

Table 1: First part of the framework applied to different domains, with examples in each cell. They serve as illustrations of how the same structure appears in very different contexts, not as models to follow.

	Science	Art	Relationship	Everyday
		Creative Focus		
Direction	aspiring to contribute to a domain through deliberate project choice and sustained work	following a particular artistic aspiration through selected projects and sustained work	being dedicated to the relationship and deliberate about how it is shaped and where it is going	aspiring to improve everyday life, even in small things, through frequent small projects
Energy	concentrating on the most promising question while keeping other lines of inquiry available	developing the most promising work or theme while sketching others	shaping the most fitting gesture, event, or next step while keeping alternatives in reserve	developing the most fitting idea while remaining able to adapt
Commitment	committing to the study or paper with the best expected contribution	committing to the work that best realizes the artistic aim	deciding on the concrete plan and carrying it out	deciding on the arrangement to execute now
		Projects		
Realize	literature review, study design, experiments, analysis, writing	sketching, drafting, revising, refining technique and form	planning, preparing, coordinating, obtaining what is needed, carrying it out	selecting materials, arranging, adjusting, assembling
Evaluate	assess rigor, clarity, novelty, and usefulness; revise accordingly	assess the work against vision, form, and effect; revise accordingly	assess whether it fits the partner, the moment, and the intended effect; adjust locally	assess fit, function, and appearance; adjust the arrangement
Release	submit, present, publish	exhibit, present, publish	enact the gesture, event, or surprise	place, use, share, or live with the result

Table 2: Second part of the framework applied to different domains, with examples in each cell. They serve as illustrations of how the same structure appears in very different contexts, not as models to follow.

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

Creative productivity rarely fails because of a simple lack of ideas or a lack of effort. More often, it fails because throughput is lost or causes problems somewhere in the system. This restriction is a structural flow failure — either an **underflow** or an **overflow**.

Examples of **underflow** include **droughts**, e.g., when time for ideation is not defended and idea generation is stifled, **leakages**, e.g., when ideas never properly enter the system because they are not captured and are therefore forgotten, and **misrouting**, e.g., when ideas are generated and captured, but do not support the project that is currently being realized.

Examples of **overflow** include **floods**, e.g., when ideas enter faster than the work can progress, **fragmentations**,[12] e.g., having too many projects at the same time spreads attention too thin, or **congestions**, e.g., when the sheer abundance of possible ideas prevents projects from being completed.

Because the areas of the creative system — **foundation, ideas, focus, and projects** — are connected to each other, an underflow or overflow in one part has consequences for the overall creative output. For example, you may want to realize projects but still lack usable ideas — not because you do not generate them, but because capturing them is too effortful to preserve them reliably. Or you may generate ideas faster than the system can process them, making it difficult to decide which projects to start.

These **misalignments** produce typical failure patterns that can be observed and then used to design interventions (see Table 3).

You can determine **where the flow slows down or accumulates, adjust the system accordingly, and observe the effects**. In contrast, simply targeting fashionable issues such

Failure Mode & Symptoms	Examples of Interventions
Underflow	
Drought «*I lack ideas.*» «*I do not know what to create.*» «*I feel uninspired.*» «*I feel creatively depleted.*»	Defend time for ideation; increase exposure to relevant material; create conditions for inspiration and insight; restore recovery and fallow time.
Leakage «*I had a good idea and lost it.*» «*Ideas come when I cannot use them.*» «*I vaguely remember ideas but cannot reconstruct them.*» «*I capture only occasionally.*»	Make capture frictionless; keep capture tools always available; use a reliable collection inbox; build a routine for transferring captures into a usable collection.
Misrouting «*I have many ideas, but not for the project I need.*» «*I get lost in side issues.*» «*My scope keeps expanding.*» «*My effort goes into the wrong level of the problem.*»	Tighten constraints; clarify the current project aim; direct ideation toward the live problem; make the core project more salient than peripheral ones.
Overflow	
Flood «*I generate more ideas than I can handle.*» «*There are too many options.*» «*My collection is overflowing.*» «*It all feels like too much.*»	Limit intake; reduce active exploration; prioritize ruthlessly; separate core, central, and peripheral projects; move excess material into cold storage.
Fragmentation «*I am always busy, but progress is slow.*» «*I keep switching files or projects.*» «*Each session begins with deciding what to do.*» «*I constantly change direction.*»	Reduce active projects; define work blocks in advance; improve continuation cues; protect the core project from interruption; make next actions obvious.
Congestion «*I start many things but rarely finish them.*» «*Projects accumulate without release.*» «*Work feels endless.*» «*My notes are full of possible projects.*» (Often overlaps with **System Drag**)	Add scope limits; define release criteria; define kill criteria; shorten project cycles; create a release structure that moves work out of the system.

Table 3: Frequent Failure Modes, Symptoms and Examples of Possible Interventions

as motivation or inspiration may either waste energy — for example, if the real issue is leakage — or make the problem worse, e.g., if the system is already bottlenecked elsewhere.

System Drag

Beyond underflow and overflow, dead weight in the system is also a frequent problem.

Every creative system accumulates inventory — material that has not yet become finished output, e.g., captured ideas, research notes, sketches, drafts, partially developed concepts, or unfinished projects. Even started but not completed changes on the foundation level belong here — for example, beginning to improve the workspace or starting to learn a skill.

Some of this inventory is normal and necessary. You might have dozens or hundreds of ideas, but only a few projects that are actively pursued. This inventory provides the building blocks for creative work — raw material, seeds for future projects, or work in progress.

However, this inventory can become dead weight and create structural pressure in the system. For example, starting to learn too many skills without consistent follow-through can produce guilt and stress. Collected ideas that are hoarded but never used turn the collection into a graveyard. Too many projects that were started but neither released nor killed create too many open loops, increase cognitive load, and impede progress on the active work.

As a result, the system begins to feel confusing, unfocused, stifling, or sluggish. You may feel overwhelmed by dead ideas, unfinished notes, abandoned work, and everything you could or should be doing. The issue here is not motivation, but excess dead weight — like trying to run a marathon with a backpack full of stones.

Because systems accumulate this weight automatically over time, this dead weight has to be reset periodically in order to restore flow. The reset removes the dead weight while preserving the system. Some ideas and projects remain and continue to serve as inspiration for future work, but the rest no longer burdens the active system.

A reset does not mean throwing ideas or projects away. It usually means moving them into **cold storage**, where they no longer interfere with the current creative process. For example, in a less salient part of the idea collection. While it can hurt to freeze good ideas or promising projects, doing so restores flow and clarity and prevents an effective system from becoming a graveyard (see Collecting Ideas on page 127 and Creative Energy on page 163 for more).

Advantages and Risks

This approach allows you to build on what you already have and see in practice what works and what does not. And not only locally — e.g., whether you capture more ideas — but globally: **Do the changes actually improve the quality and quantity of your creative work?**

Keeping this end goal in mind prevents **over-organization**. Organization is crucial, but it can easily become a displacement behavior. Tools, methods, or infrastructure become enjoyable to optimize. This may even improve a local aspect of the system, but still have no effect — or even a negative effect — on the overall creative output. For example, endlessly optimizing an idea collection may improve collecting, but take time away from actually realizing creative projects.

However, this approach is not without risks.

Even the best system cannot guarantee success, because successful creative work depends on many variables. What **is** possible, however, is to **increase the likelihood of successful**

projects. By focusing on process quality rather than guaranteed outcomes, you improve the quality of your decisions while working. And over multiple projects, increasing the likelihood of success is often enough.[13]

The framework itself is abstract. That allows it to be applied to any kind of creative work, but it also makes concrete suggestions more difficult. For that reason, the Supplemental Materials (see page 45) — especially the Integration Worksheet — provide additional support for implementation.

This approach may also seem «*cold*» or «*mechanistic*» — and in one sense it is. Some people resist organization because they regard spontaneous inspiration as essential to their process. Others fear that once they start thinking about how they do creative work, they will lose the ability to do it — like asking a centipede how it moves its legs. But having «*no*» organization usually means having accidental, unconscious, or poor organization — often imposed by the environment. And while inspiration cannot be designed directly, it is possible to create conditions that make it more likely. So if these concerns apply to you, you may find that improving your creative system leaves you with more free-spirited inspiration and less noise.

So let us make things concrete by applying this creative system.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter2

Chapter 3: Application

> «There's a pretty big difference between wanting something and deciding to have it.»
>
> *Scott Adams*

The framework makes your creative system visible.[14] This allows you to run low-threat trials of different behaviors in order to see which ones actually improve your creative work.

Because the framework is non-linear, you can begin improving it anywhere. For example, you might start with an aspiration (see Creative Direction on page 147), with a specific project (e.g., a bachelor's thesis), with a few ideas (e.g., plot and character ideas that could become a novel), or with your knowledge and skills (e.g., learning about a domain such as music or improv in order to be creative in it). The framework invites exploration. And if you want to improve a specific aspect — e.g., generating more ideas or capturing more reliably — you can start there.

For example, suppose you want to be creative in music. You can start by improving your capabilities (Foundation), writing a particular song (Project), developing ideas for songs or performances (Ideas), or clarifying your aspiration (Creative Focus), e.g., to make a some kind of music great again.

If your creativity falters, say you cannot seem to finish the song, you can trace the issue. Is it in the Project itself, for example lack of time or fear of feedback? In Creative Focus, for example too many competing projects? In Ideas, for example no ideas in the collection, too few ideas captured, or no idle time for generation? Or in the Foundation, for example insufficient capabilities or an environment toxic to creativity?

Once you have identified a likely reason, you can treat it as a hypothesis and test it. For example, schedule a day or two to work on the song. You might be right — the chances are good. If not, you can try something else. This can be a different intervention for the same hypothesized cause, such as defending some time each day, or it can mean addressing a different possible issue. The system gives feedback on whether you are correct — here, progress in songwriting.

In practice, because creative work is a system, you rarely change only one thing. Most changes affect other parts of the system as well. For example, if you generate more ideas, you will likely also need a better way to capture them, and your collection must be able to handle the influx. It may also become harder to stay focused on the project you are currently realizing if the new ideas belong to another project and look very promising.

Thus, the suggested approach is to treat your creative process as a system you can debug:

1. make your system visible,
2. diagnose it (underflow, optimal flow, overflow),
3. intervene if needed (run local trials),
4. reflect on the system effects (what changed), and
5. over time, strive for an equilibrium that supports long-term creative output.

You improve your existing system while continuing to use it.

1. Orientation: Make Your System Visible

You already have a creative system. It may be well designed, or it may rely on ad hoc organization — a drawer full of idea fragments, avoidance patterns as a prioritization rule, or memory as the default storage decision for ideas.

But it is there.

The next chapters examine the respective areas and elements. As you read them, you can use the Creative System Map (see Figure 2) to write down how you usually handle these aspects. Your system is already shaping your creative output. Mapping it makes it visible and helps you identify what works, where friction occurs, and what could be improved.

For example:

- **Foundation:** What knowledge, skills, and habits enable your creative work? Which do you struggle with?
- **Ideas:** How do you generate, capture, and collect ideas? How good are the ideas you generate?
- **Creative Focus:** How do you decide which projects to focus on? Do you stay with them? What do you want to achieve long-term?
- **Projects:** How do you realize creative projects? Where does realization fail, and why? How do you evaluate them? When and how do you release them?

Taken together, this should answer questions such as: «*Where do ideas currently land?*», «*Where does creative work stall?*», and «*Where does work actually move forward?*»

If you are unsure how you really behave in practice, just observe yourself for a while. For example, each time you produce, lose, postpone, or develop an idea, briefly note what happened and where. If you have never examined your system before, your reaction might be something like: «*Oh. I am already doing all of this — just not as well as I could, and without consciously deciding what works best for me.*»

Accuracy matters here — what do you actually do, not what you think you should do or could do. In some cases, that will look messy and then that is exactly the right thing to externalize. The point is to anchor change in what you are

Figure 2: Creative System Map. You can find it online at https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/sup

already doing. Designing a new system on a drafting board usually fails because it is not connected to daily life.

If ideas for changes occur while mapping the terrain, write them down. But map the full system before deciding what to change, so the decision is informed. Likewise, do not yet evaluate whether a given element works well or poorly. Look at the wider context. Something that is merely annoying may matter much less than a real and perhaps «*boring*» bottleneck. Worse, you might change something that looks weak locally but works well in the system overall.

2. Flow Diagnosis

Making your creative system visible should reveal what works well and what you might want to improve. Ideally, each element is in equilibrium — **optimal flow**. However, underflows and overflows can occur. Table 4 and Table 5 provide examples of all three states, further examples are at the end of the framework chapters.

While overflow may sound like a good problem to have, it can severely cripple creative output. Depending on where it occurs, you may become paralyzed by choice, finish nothing, or become so flooded with ideas that you can hardly do anything. It also tends to disrupt sleep and leads to burnout quickly. The ideal is sustainable creative output — neither too little throughput nor too much — across all elements.

It may be tempting to change the whole system. But identifying the main bottleneck or flood area makes it much easier to see whether a change actually improves creative output and whether it can be sustained.

Think of the creative process as a system with leaks and burst pipes. Start there. The aim is a system that is at least good enough in all areas and elements while you continue creating.

	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
		Foundation	
Person	low energy, low meaning, fear of exposure, weak follow-through	enough meaning and energy to engage; realistic confidence; workable discipline	overidentification with the work, perfectionistic overcontrol, compulsive effort, grandiosity
Environment	little protection, little support, constant interruption, weak infrastructure	protected time, workable tools, enough support, environment fits the work	too many demands, too much input, too much social pressure, too many opportunities competing for attention
Capabilities	knowledge or skill too weak for the intended work	sufficient knowledge and skill for the current level of work, with room to grow	endless learning without application, tool-chasing, option paralysis from too many possible directions
		Ideas	
Generate	too few ideas, blocked or dried up	steady stream of usable ideas	too many ideas, too fast, distracting from execution
Capture	ideas are missed or lost because capture is absent or too slow	promising ideas are captured quickly and reliably	everything is captured, including low-value material, which breaks flow or creates clutter
Collect	ideas are scattered, inaccessible, or too thinly developed to use	collection is searchable, usable, and supports ongoing work	the collection becomes a hoard, or an end in itself

Table 4: Examples of underflow, optimal flow, and overflow across the main areas and elements of the creative system (part 1).

Diagnostic Question 1: What is the main limiting factor, or what has most clearly gone out of bounds?

Where does output reliably decrease or stall? Where does it flood the system and need to be reduced? Put differently, what is the largest pain point that most strongly impedes your creative work?

This may not be the place where improvement sounds most attractive, e.g., the overflowing drawer, the lost notes, or

	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
		Creative Focus	
Direction	no clear center of gravity, hesitant exploration	clear direction without rigidity	locked into a specific path, inability to abandon projects, overscheduling
Energy	weak prioritization	one core focus with a few peripheral explorations	too many competing centers of gravity, constraints strangle creativity
Commitment	cannot commit, delays starting, keeps circling possibilities	commits to the right project at the right time	commits too quickly, too often, or to too many projects at once
		Projects	
Realize	sporadic effort, poor continuation, project repeatedly stalls	sustained progress, good continuation, manageable friction	perfectionistic overworking, uncontrolled scope expansion, burnout
Evaluate	evaluation is avoided, delayed, or ignored	evaluation is timely, useful, and improves the work	overanalysis, fixation on comments, constant reevaluation, paralysis
Release	release is postponed indefinitely, work is withheld out of fear	work is released deliberately, at the right level and in the right place	premature release, oversharing, compulsive publishing, repetitive self-promotion

Table 5: Examples of underflow, optimal flow, and overflow across the main areas and elements of the creative system (part 2).

the stalled project. But it has to be real — something you are actually doing now.

Diagnostic Question 2: What causes the underflow or overflow — where is the problem situated?

Sometimes the cause is obvious. For example, if you do not capture ideas despite having them, the problem is usually that capturing needs to be improved. But diagnosis can also be tricky and may require tracing the flow more carefully. Perhaps you do not capture ideas because you are in an environ-

ment where creativity is not actually valued — so why bother preserving ideas that will go nowhere?[15]

Non-events are even harder to notice. For example, you may struggle to choose which projects to realize, and a mentor might help. But while conflict with an existing mentor is easy to notice, not having one — and therefore not even noticing that mentorship would help — is often overlooked.

This systems perspective can be a relief. It helps you see that the issue may not be «*motivation*» or «*disorganization*» in general, but a specific element — e.g., underdeveloped capturing — that is holding you back. Something concrete that can be improved.

3. Intervention: Run Local Trials

Once you have identified a major point for improvement and a likely cause, you can test your assumptions — change one thing and monitor the outcome. The book chapters, and the more specific supplemental materials, will give you starting points.

However, while reading, planning, and even having insights are comparatively easy, changing behavior in a way that actually improves something is not.

- **Your life is a system:** Many parts of life influence each other. Work affects sleep, sleep affects mood, mood affects what you take on. Things change whether you plan for them or not, and you never see the whole picture clearly. So no element changes in isolation, and outcomes often differ from what you expected.
- **Time is limited:** Most days are already full. Adding a new behavior usually means taking time or energy away from something else. Every change is therefore also a decision about what not to do.

- **Life gets in the way:** Even well-intended changes compete with deadlines, illness, social obligations, and ordinary bad days. Without structure, intentions are easily forgotten or misremembered.

Taken together, reading something once or making a one-time effort rarely changes behavior for long. To see whether an insight can actually fit into your life, you need to test it under real conditions.

This is necessarily a long-term process. Setting calendar reminders — for example, every two weeks — can help you stay with it. Otherwise, life gets in the way and attempted changes are easily forgotten. Once reminded, you can also look at how well it worked or, for example, what crowded out the attempt, and deal with that.

While there is much that could be improved, small, iterative changes are usually better than a complete system overhaul. These small changes, e.g., trying a different capture method or changing the workplace setup, survive contact with reality better, because a single change can be implemented quickly and you see its effects faster and more clearly. You are also not destabilizing your entire prior system or putting it into question, which could feel threatening. Nor do you need elaborate instructions or checklists about what to do when — just simple reminders.

Small changes also allow you to continue working while you try them out. You just determine what you want to try out and do it for a while, e.g., a few weeks, while continuing your creative work. Otherwise, trying to improve your creative system distracts too much from actually doing creative work.

Changes must not destroy what already works well or what is generally needed for creativity.[16] A major example is **fallow time** or **idle cycles**, which are easily «*optimized away*»

and whose loss then undermines creativity in the long run (see Defended Time on page 81).

Some improvements have to be made indirectly, e.g., trying to improve **inspiration** and **insight**. They are **second-order phenomena** that often collapse under too much observation or evaluation. What helps is to create the conditions they require — often free activation or idle cycles — and then leave them alone. That is tricky, because you cannot, for example, go for a walk *in order to have insights*. You need to make walking — without podcasts or music, so idle cycles remain possible — part of your daily routine.

Because these changes are time-limited and produce feedback, you do not need to get them right on the first attempt. You will find out whether you were right once you test them.

Because meaningful trials are not trivial, the Integration Worksheet was designed to support exactly this step: turning insights into behavioral trials. It contains more information on designing a trial, common failure modes, examples, ways to learn across multiple trials, and a form sheet (see Figure 3).

In brief, you define what you want to try and how you will recognize success or failure, run the trial for a limited time, look at what actually happened, and then decide what to keep, modify, or abandon. Most changes require several iterations before you find a version that truly fits — or discover that it does not.

This approach has a strong behavior focus, which fits the definition of creativity as the deliberate creation of something new and useful. Behavior is truthful. We often merely imagine that something does or does not work for us. We buy things that seem like a good idea but only use them a few times. Or we delay trying something for ages, only to discover later that we now could not imagine life without it. Often the only way is to try it and see what happens. But because

Integration Worksheet: Capturing Ideas (Example 1)
1. Reason for Change
What is happening or not happening that makes this worth changing? Describe the problem, not the cause. Litmus Test: If this were solved, would it matter in six months?
I often remember having ideas but forget them before using them. When I try to continue writing, they are gone. My work could be better if these ideas were captured, even rough. This feels like a leak in my creative process.
2. Current Pattern
What is currently happening and how does it continue? If nothing changes (frequency/duration, effects, consequences, barriers)?
I notice forgotten ideas after a shower, when returning from work, or while falling asleep. I am not sure how often – perhaps four ideas in the last two weeks that I actually captured. If I do nothing, ideas will likely continue to be lost.
3. Goal Behaviors
What would you be doing differently if this worked? What should change, and what must remain stable?
Capture more ideas (e.g., more than four in two weeks). Allow some additional effort, but not at the cost of being late or reducing sleep.
4. Change Behaviors
Plan for normal life conditions, not ideal ones. Specify when, where, and how much. Include start, what you do, and where the required time and attention come from.
Behavior: Capture ideas by placing waterproof notepads in the shower and a notepad in the car, plus using a voice recorder at night.
Trigger: Notepads visible; recorder on watch face.
Start Action: Pick up notepad or activate recorder and note the idea without elaboration.
Behavior: Capture the idea before leaving the context (shower, parked car, bedside).
Time Source: Fits into small gaps; takes less than a minute, so no activity must be replaced.
5. Success/Stop Criteria
What observable results count as working? What outcome will make you stop? Which foreseeable edge cases need to be decided in advance?
Success: More than four ideas captured in two weeks.
Abort: Average sleep quality drops by 10 points, or two nights in a row with ≥ 1 hours less sleep, more than two late meetings due to capturing.
Ambiguity: Sleep loss caused by unrelated stress does not count. Idea quality is irrelevant for this trial.
6. Trial Duration
How long must this run to judge whether the behavior integrates? When will you decide, and how will you ensure the trial stays viable?
Duration: Four weeks
Decision on: 11.04.
Check in: Calendar reminders ensure the change stays visible even if the notepads fade into the background.
7. Run the Trial – Log Behavior
Record only what is needed to evaluate the success criteria. Less is more. Track moments – times, actions, deviations – without interpretation.
Structural Change: Check in to ensure notepads are still usable.
30.3. (start)
27.3.
3.4.
10.4.
11.4. (end)
Car notepad replaced.
28.3. wrote notes in parking lot, felt socially awkward.
5.4. used watch to capture ideas in bed, later expanded into longer writing session.
8.4. Shower notepad works well.
9.4. Smartwatch capture easy to forget – weekly reminder needed.
8. Decision
Determine the outcome using the observable evidence and the predefined Success/Stop Criteria.
Observable Evidence for Decision:
48 ideas captured on paper, 11 audio files, no lateness observed. Sleep duration and quality unchanged except for one shorter night.
Keep (criteria met as defined)
Modify (partially met/adjust design)
Abort (not met/change unsuitable)
9. Reflection on the Trial
What changed? What did not change? What does this suggest about how the behavior fits into your life? Did the trial have unintended effects or displace something important?
Success criteria met and goal achieved. Ideas are no longer lost.
Car ideas tend to be work-focused, shower ideas are broader and often generate new writing directions. Bedtime recordings are less clear but occasionally useful. The structure is worthwhile but may need refinement for nighttime capture.
10. Next Steps
Based on the trial, what will you do now (e.g., continue, adjust, begin a new trial, or schedule a review)?
Structural change worked. Keep calendar reminder every three weeks to check notepad usability, weekly reminder to review audio captures. Review overall decision in six months (calendar event set).
Organizing Creativity • Sheet V1.00 • Made with ChatGPT Input • organizingcreativity.com/oc3/ws • 6/13

Figure 3: Example of an Integration Worksheet Form with the aim of improving idea capture. The approach uses environmental design (notepads/smartwatch available for capture) with a bounded experiment (4 weeks) and irreversible evidence (sheets with ideas/ audio files). See the Integration Worksheet for more information: https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/sup

self-deception is also easy here, it is best to do this under controlled circumstances.

This also develops **self-efficacy**. You see in your behavior what you can do and how well you can do it. Once developed, such improvements often last. More importantly, they allow you to influence how your days — and over time, your life — actually go. In short, behavior is the path to capability.

That behavior focus does not mean that internal states such as feelings, motivation, meaning, resistance, or insight do not matter. It means they usually have to be translated into behavioral proxies. Avoidance may signal dislike, adherence may signal fit, delay may signal friction, and completion may signal alignment.

After each trial, you should usually know more clearly whether to keep that behavior, modify it, or discard it, depending on how well it fits into your life and whether it improves your creative work. The goal is not more reflection for its own sake, but to find out which changes become part of lived practice and which do not (see Practice on page 152).

4. Reflection: Impact and System Effects

Changes will usually have local effects. For example, improving the infrastructure for capturing ideas should lead to more ideas being captured. If it does not, you still learned something about the actual problem, so even an unsuccessful change puts you in a better position. Trials only truly fail when they are designed so badly that they reveal nothing (see the trial failure modes on the Integration Worksheet).

These immediate effects are usually easy to assess.

If the change was successful, do not immediately optimize it further. Let it stabilize over the next weeks. That avoids endless fiddling. A successful system is as frictionless as possible, but nothing has zero friction and entropy remains a

problem. However, a working system lets you focus on the creative work rather than on maintaining the system.[17]

If a change was unsuccessful, be curious. Why did it not work? Were the assumptions wrong? Did the implementation fail? Is the change simply slow, or slower than expected? Is the tool attractive, but just not a fit for you?[18] Did life get in the way? Look honestly at the situation and at what you actually tried, then use that information for the next iteration. It may take several trials to improve a single part of the system.

There are usually also side effects and more far-reaching system effects, and a local improvement does not guarantee an improvement in the overall quality or quantity of creative work. That is unavoidable in a system whose variables are connected and influence one another. So ask: What else happened when you changed something? What improved? What became strained or destabilized? Where did your Creative System Map shift as a consequence?

Sometimes effects in other areas are merely spikes. For example, once you begin to understand a programming language (**Capabilities**), you may suddenly be flooded with app ideas you can now implement. Then it makes sense to capitalize on that windfall — for example, by jotting those ideas down. Such phases are rare and time-limited, so use them.

Other pressures are more enduring. For example, starting a new tool for collecting ideas may cut into the time available for your main project. Then something else has to adapt — e.g., protecting project time despite the fun of improving the collection.

And sometimes it is best to revert a change because the negatives outweigh the positives relative to the end goal. For example, when a tool that should have remained a means to an end becomes so interesting that it consistently interferes with actually creating things. Then it may simply be too good at the wrong level.

5. Strive for an End-Goal Equilibrium

Because every change affects the system, the optimal state for creative output is a coherent system with flow in a workable range across all areas and elements. This could mean a foundation that supports creative work (knowledge, skills, time, the right amount of support), the right amount of ideas, captured and collected in ways that neither starve nor overwhelm the system, a focus on one main project at a time while other project ideas can still develop, and the resources needed to realize, evaluate, and release the current project. Spikes and drops will always happen, but both too little and too much are unsustainable over time.

Seeing how your system works and how it reacts to change allows you to create the right amount of flow across all areas and elements. Once you have managed that — at least during stable phases — the system should become invisible again. It just works, and you focus on creating. Maintenance overhead and friction can then be reduced further by automating tasks that are stable and recurring.

However, entropy ensures that creative systems drift unless they are periodically re-examined. Regular reminders — e.g., once every two months — can help catch this drift. Occasional novelty, such as new tools, new environments, or renewed reflection, can also help prevent stagnation.

Overall, the system should enable long-term creativity. And while creativity will usually include phases of frustration and dissatisfaction, the balance over time should still be positive. Your creative system should not draw attention to itself — it should leave you free to deliberately create things that are new and useful.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter3

Meta: Supplemental Materials

«What is worth having is worth working for.»
«His Dark Materials» by Philip Pullman

The book itself focuses on the invariant aspects that apply to almost everyone who wants to be creative. It functions like a map. The supplemental materials operationalize and, where needed, extend this framework. Separating them from the book keeps the book shorter and the framework more universally applicable. It also allows easier updates, as specific tools can become outdated quickly.

Thus, the supplemental materials serve two functions:

- **Reference material:** a toolbox of options rather than a set of recommendations or methods to master (e.g., more detailed information on possible interventions, creativity methods, or capturing methods).
- **Operational instructions:** tools used to specify and run trials, and thereby to improve your existing creative system.

They are the toolkit of this book, meant to be used selectively depending on your concrete needs. Without them, the book is still useful, but less concrete in application.

However, they are only a means to an end — tools for modifying specific elements of your system in order to improve the quality and quantity of your creative work. You do not need to work through them exhaustively. They exist to provide examples and options if you want to explore a particular area more deeply. The Creative System Map and the Integration Worksheet are recommended for almost everyone. Of the remaining materials, most readers will likely use only a small subset relevant to their current work. More than that would likely be displacement behavior.

At the end of each chapter, you will find a link to a page containing all supplemental materials relevant to that chapter. The complete list is available at:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/sup

Examples are shown in Figure 4.

Something Missing?

If you would like to see a specific topic covered, have questions or comments, or know of another approach that works and might be worth including, please drop me a line at:

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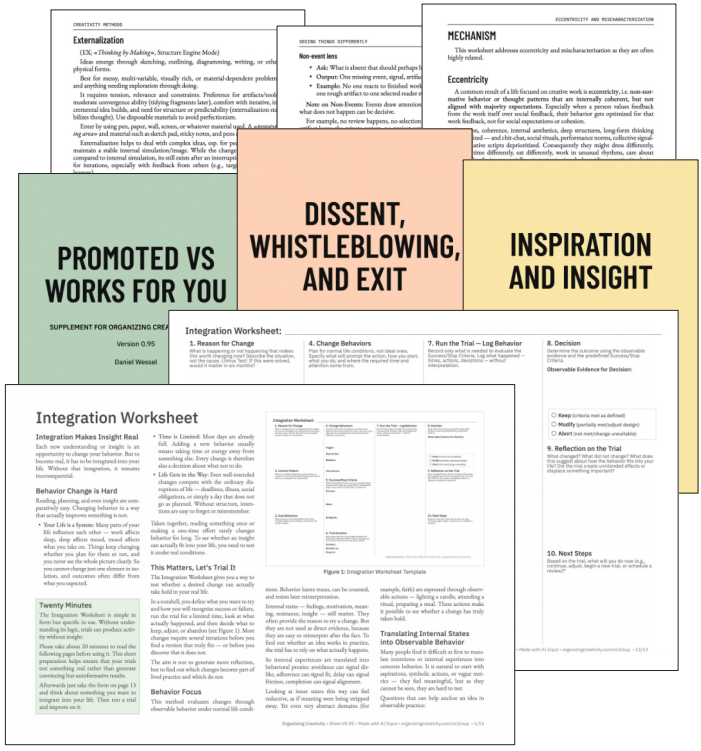

Figure 4: Examples of provided supplemental material.

Framework: Foundation

> «Fundamentals, fundamentals, fundamentals. [...]
> You've got to get the fundamentals down,
> because otherwise the fancy stuff is not going to work.»
> *Randy Pausch*

The following chapters address the foundation of creative work — the conditions that make ideation, focus, and project realization possible in the first place.

Person examines the individual side of the system — which personal attributes matter for creative work, where they support it, where they constrain it, and how they can be trained, supported, compensated for, or worked around.

Environment turns to the conditions under which creative work happens. It examines how physical, digital, social, and cultural environments shape behavior, and how these environments can be adjusted so that they support the work rather than distort or inhibit it.

Capabilities focuses on what can actually be done at a given time. It covers staying capable, working capably through focused hard work and defended time, and building new capabilities where they are genuinely needed.

Tools examines the technologies and instruments that extend capability, shape process, and influence outcome. It also looks at the risks of tool dependence, over-optimization, and confusing tools with the work itself.

Taken together, Person, Environment, and Capabilities form the foundation on which ideas can be generated and projects can be realized, while Tools are meta-aspects that shape the options.

Chapter 4: Person

> «... an honest-to-God artist who can paint — and works at it. One who doesn't spend his time sopping up sauce or blowing weed, and talking about the painting he's going to do. Joe paints. He's a craftsman as well as an artist. Well, maybe I don't know what an artist is but I know what a craftsman is and I respect craftsmen. Too few of them in this decadent world.»
>
> *«I Will Fear No Evil» by Robert A. Heinlein*

The person is the individual who does the creative work,[19] and many attempts to improve creativity focus here. Personal attributes influence what is possible and define tolerances — for example energy, working style, cognitive limits, or social preference.

These attributes matter in practice. Some modes of idea generation, for example, depend on capacities that not everyone has to the same degree. Internal simulation requires strong internal imagery — without it, the image collapses too quickly. Some domains and fields also impose hard requirements, such as the hand coordination needed to play a harp.

However, attributes are not destiny. If one ability is weak or unavailable, alternatives can often be found — for example, externalization instead of internal imagery. Nor are attributes universally positive. Curiosity expands the search space, but unchecked curiosity diffuses effort. Discipline supports realization, but in excess becomes rigidity.

It therefore makes little sense to describe the ideal creative person or to compile a catalogue of supposedly desirable traits. That also invites self-deception. It is too easy to imagine oneself in flattering abstractions.

What matters is not who one imagines oneself to be, but which attributes are actually required, over time, for the work one is actually trying to do.

The focus of this chapter is therefore on design. Where do a person's attributes support the work, where do they impede it, and where do they need more experience, training, support, compensation, or delegation?

If person and work are misaligned, that is just a design problem that can be solved.

Creative Spark vs. the Right Niche

One attribute often treated as essential to creativity is the special «*creative⌣ spark*». And yes, raw ideational potential is unequally distributed. For some people, generating ideas is simply easier. They have a higher associative range, unusual perception, or forms of insight that open doors others do not even see.

However, this mainly affects particular ideation modes and the domains that rely on them. Some ideation modes fit some people much better than others. Associative drift, for example, benefits from high associative range and ambiguity tolerance. Constraint-driven exploration relies more on inhibition control, conscientiousness, and deliberate variation. The mistake is to assume that there is only one truly creative way to generate ideas, or that one mode is inherently superior.

What matters is fit. Some people are excellent in one domain and poorly suited to another. In the latter case, that is a mismatch between the individual and the mode or domain. In addition, having ideas is only one part of creative work. Ideas still have to be realized, which requires knowledge, skill, persistence, and other decidedly «*non-sparky*» attributes. So even gifted individuals or «*sparks*»[20] cannot bypass the actual work.

So «*the⌣ spark*» is not the whole story. Creativity is not reserved for a gifted elite. What matters is finding the right niche, the right mode, and the right constraints under which a person can deliberately create something new and useful.

Attributes to Design For

Which attributes influence the creative process and should therefore be treated as design constraints — to rely on, improve, compensate for, or delegate?

What is needed, across the whole process from building the foundation to generating ideas, to focusing on a few, and realizing them in projects, can be grouped into three sections: **desire**, **craft**, and **will** to create.[21] All three must work sufficiently well together if something alive is to emerge.

Desire to Create

There has to be a desire to create. Energy has to enter the system at all and be directed toward a specific project. That desire can be intrinsic — e.g., seeing things differently or feeling an urge to create — or extrinsic, e.g., wanting money or fame. Intrinsic motivation is usually stronger and more persistent. However, while powerful, desire is also fickle and can burn you out quickly if it is not handled carefully.

Relevant aspects of desire are:

- **Meaning:** The underlying «*Why*» as a motivator, especially during hard or tedious project phases, learning, and habit change. It connects the person to something larger than the self — for example discovery, beauty, human ascent, or the glory of God — and provides purpose, coherence, resonance, and significance.[22] If meaning matters, it includes the possibility of failure and actually costs something (see also Creative Focus on pages 145ff).

- **Curiosity:** The desire to know, to try out, and to find out is a powerful mechanism for idea generation. It includes a «*What if?*» or improvement mentality. Curiosity can be natural, or it can be supported with ideation techniques. Overflow can be kept in check by defending core work phases and seeking variety within a topic.[23] Expertise can also undermine curiosity if the false belief that one already knows what will happen prevents further exploration.[24]
- **Regulation and Play:** The ability to deal with negative outcomes — e.g., mistakes, failures, or tedium — as well as exuberant positive emotions. It is also useful for shifting into the right stance for the work, e.g., more playful for generating ideas or more focused for realization. While verbal processing is often promoted for emotional regulation, other approaches can work better. Humor and playfulness are especially useful regulators of fear, brittleness, and narrowness. They cushion setbacks, widen the design space by widening the mind, and counter anger and fear, including fear of mistakes. If humor comes from a good place, it is also a strong indicator of a non-toxic workplace.

While desire is necessary, this does not mean «*follow your passion*». Passion does not care about reality, e.g., about skill, demand, or fit, and during most creative projects, passion alone will not get you across the finish line. If passion is your guide, it becomes hard to finish projects once that passion is gone — temporarily or permanently.[25]

Craft to Create

When people are motivated to create, they need craftsmanship to make that work possible. Actually converting energy into usable work goes far beyond «*being inspired*». Inspiration can help with idea generation, and the conditions for it can be shaped. But creative work requires much more than that. It needs a great deal of plain craftsmanship to turn ideas into realized projects.

That craftsmanship requires knowledge and skill. You have to work with something, be able to do something, and know what has already been done and why. Consider Kekulé's discovery of the benzene ring. He had a dream of a snake biting its tail, which led him to consider the form of a ring. Sudden insight after incubation? Yes. Was knowledge unnecessary? No. He had extensive knowledge of chemistry and had thought about the problem for a long time with that knowledge in mind. Yes, he gave his mind time to relax and work it out, but he first invested heavily in learning what there was to learn.[26]

Relevant aspects of craft are:

- **Domain Knowledge and Skill:** Acquiring the necessary knowledge and skill is a lifelong process that takes hard work and time (see **Capabilities**). The interest in learning the domain and working in it has to be strong enough — not just in having done the hard parts. This includes fundamentals as well as the deeper principles behind them. Relationships, models, application, and principles usually beat procedure or rote learning. It also requires that the work in the domain be at least doable, especially regarding hard barriers such as perceptual-motor capacities. The main ideation modes valued in the domain and required by the field should fit the individual reasonably well, or be easily compensated for.
- **Competence:** The capacity to realize ideas under real constraints. Without domain competence, the risk of illusory competence is high — ideas that appear elegant in abstraction, but fail under material, technical, temporal, or social limits. Execution may be direct (e.g., painter, research scientist) or indirect (e.g., creative director, principal investigator), but both demand deep fluency in the domain. Unless they are just managers, even those who direct work must understand the craft well enough to judge feasibility, trade-offs, and quality. Such competence usually develops

through sustained practice, often extending well beyond formal education. With increasing competence, one no longer has to think consciously about every step. Skill becomes available when needed, and attention can go more deeply into the task. Expertise and intuition are often the result of knowledge and skill that can no longer be fully verbalized. Competence is also necessary for self-efficacy, the belief that one can achieve a goal through one's own actions. Perfectionism, however, must be avoided, because it is both toxic and impossible (see Perfectionism on page 58).

- **Judgment:** Craft depends not only on knowledge and skill, but on the ability to make good judgments under real conditions, including being sensitive to constraints.

  This begins with **vigilance** — noticing when things differ from what was expected, and when something important or promising is happening. Careful work makes such deviations visible — sloppy work hides them.

  It also includes **perspective-taking** — seeing the work from different relevant viewpoints, especially those of the target group or the field, without having to agree with every one of them).[27]

  Critical and skeptical thinking are needed to test whether claims, impressions, or ideas are actually supported by evidence and argument rather than merely appealing. On that basis, decisions have to be made without drifting into rumination or overanalysis.

  Finally, because some judgments will inevitably be wrong, **intellectual humility** is needed — the willingness to learn from mistakes, feedback, and reality rather than rationalizing them away.

  In creative work, judgment means staying oriented toward what is actually there, correcting course when needed, and deciding well enough to keep the work moving.

- **Discipline:** Because many projects cannot be completed in a single burst, repeated engagement is needed — enough to make meaningful progress and eventually finish. Pacing — with breaks and break days — is as important as workdays. Discipline is also needed when the work becomes tedious or slow. Output may vary, but regularity should not. Work on every workday, even if only the minimum needed to maintain progress.

Will to Create

Because the creative work has to be new and useful, risk is unavoidable, and there is often pushback as well. Energy has to keep flowing when resistance increases.

Creative work therefore requires the will to create — to go for what you want despite friction, and to accept being seen failing in pursuit of something real. This only becomes visible once there is an opposing force — from the work, from yourself, or from others. And counterintuitively, it also includes the courage to quit when needed.

Relevant aspects of will are:

- **Own Agenda:** Being intentional about what you want to achieve — not only desiring something, but actually going for it. Despite others pushing you in another direction or wanting to use you for their own purposes. Ideally this agenda is intrinsically motivated and aligned with your values, ideas, and independent judgment (see also Creative Direction on page 147).
- **Ambiguity Tolerance and Courage:** Creative work involves risk. Because the work is new, success is never guaranteed, and the duration of unsuccessful phases is often unclear.

  This requires **ambiguity tolerance** — the ability to continue working without premature closure, false certainty, or retreat into the merely familiar.

It also requires **courage** — the willingness to act despite the possibility of failure, wasted effort, criticism, embarrassment, or pushback.

A **willingness to make mistakes** belongs here as well. Finding out what works usually means first finding out what does not, whether in sketches, drafts, experiments, or behavioral trials. This does not mean blundering around or treating carelessness as a virtue.[28] It means being willing to make defensible mistakes in pursuit of something real.

Fear is not the enemy or a sign of weakness. It often marks what matters, and the arousal it produces is simply energy that can be channeled.[29] But fear is destructive to creativity when it prevents creative work. It easily disguises itself as prudence — «*not good enough yet*», «*do it later*», «*prepare a bit more*» — and can thereby prevent completion. Courage in creative work is not the absence of fear, but the capacity to continue despite it.

- **Opportunity Exposure:** While you cannot design serendipity or luck directly, you can make the conditions for it more likely. People who were «*lucky*» were not dragged out from under their beds. They were already out there. They made themselves visible and available, so that when opportunities appeared, they were in a position to act on them.[30] Good work that is never seen cannot be selected, supported, or used. You do not have to become loud, but you do have to become findable (see also Project Release on page 231). This applies not only to the creative work itself, but also to other aspects. For example, in learning the domain by finding mentors who recognize your value and can provide opportunities (see also Environment on page 63).
- **Self-Regulation, Persistence, and Resilience: Self-regulation** is needed to control behavior even under stress. This includes planning, self-monitoring, emotional regulation,

impulse control, goal setting, feedback, self-awareness, self-efficacy, and coping strategies.

Persistence is needed to stay with one project despite distractions or reactance — whether from the work itself or from other people. A common threat is project-jumping simply because the grass looks greener elsewhere. A strong why helps during long uphill phases and periods of resistance (see Creative Focus on page 145).

Resilience is needed in order to deal with hardships and stressors without disintegrating. Here again, a strong why helps.[31] Small but constant stressors are often overlooked — the proverbial grain of sand in the boot. Removing them can provide disproportional benefits.

- **Quitting Well:** Because many ideas will not work out, resources should not be wasted on projects that can no longer succeed. This means avoiding zombie projects that only pull time and energy away from the ones that still could work. That does not mean quitting as soon as the work becomes tedious. Tedium is expected. What matters is whether the probability of success has become so low that a kill criterion is triggered — then quitting well is a virtue (see Creative Commitment on pages 175ff).

Common Failure Modes of a Person

Three common failure modes on the level of the person are too many interests, perfectionism, and reactance against a near-perfect fit.

Too Many Interests

While many interests can benefit certain ideation modes — for example through serendipitous collisions — they also quickly disperse creative energy across too many areas, leaving too little for actual progress. This is common in learning,

when people want to study too many disparate things at once, and in realization, when they try to pursue too many projects simultaneously.

Not choosing what to focus on is itself a choice — choosing dispersion over impact. A tiered approach can help. Only begin learning something new once the previous topic has become self-sustaining. It also helps to distinguish clearly between projects that have crossed the Rubicon and those that have not (see Creative Commitment on page 175).

Perfectionism

Creative projects often have to satisfy multiple quality criteria that require trade-offs. A text, for example, has to be understandable, but also say something new, and be comprehensive enough. Optimizing one criterion usually weakens another. So the text can never be perfect on all criteria at once. Likewise, what counts as ideal differs across audiences and even within the same person over time. The creator changes while creating, so the standard of «*perfect*» is unstable as well.

Thus, the work can never be perfect — not for a moment, not for everyone, and not over time.

Because the work can never reach perfection, aiming for perfection means it will never be finished. In that sense, perfectionism is the death of creativity — and even God did not go for it.[32]

That does not mean quality does not matter. It does. What matters is threshold integrity — being clearly above the minimum standard for good work. But that standard is bounded by hard questions: How many resources can I invest? How polished should this be? How much? How fast? How consistently? At what personal cost? The aim is ethical craftsmanship — perhaps even beauty and excellence, where warranted — but never perfectionism (see Figure 5).

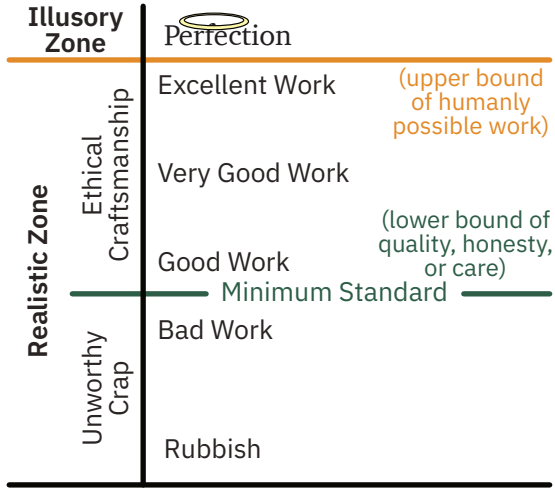

Figure 5: Ethical craftsmanship vs. perfectionism.

Reactance Against a Near-Perfect Fit

Sometimes a near-perfect fit between person and domain produces reactance rather than commitment. The obvious choice can feel imposed, especially when other people push for it. Then the need to choose for oneself conflicts with the feeling that the choice has already been made.

In such cases, it can help to keep plans private until they are settled. It can also help to remember that conformism and rebellion are often the same pattern in opposite directions — both let others determine the course.[33] What matters is being willing to go for what one actually wants, both when others disapprove and when they wholeheartedly approve.

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

Underflows and overflows can occur easily in the areas of desire, craft, and will. Table 6 and Table 7 show common examples.

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Meaning	pointlessness, purely transactional work, no durable reason to continue	a strong why, connected to something significant enough to sustain effort	ideological possession, fanaticism, brittle overinvestment
Curiosity	little exploration, low questioning, narrow search space	active exploration, openness to surprise, directed variation	interest in everything, diffusion, endless exploration without realization
Regulation and Play	overwhelmed by emotion, fear narrows the mind, no relief or recovery	emotional steadiness, ability to shift stance, humor and play support the work	emotional volatility, suppression, or fun displacing the work
Domain Knowledge and Skill	missing fundamentals, weak fit to domain demands, too many compensations needed	sufficient knowledge and skill to work meaningfully and keep improving	endless learning without application, near-perfect fit triggering reactance
Competence	ideas fail in execution, large gaps between intention and realization	ideas can be realized under real constraints; skill becomes available when needed	perfectionism, fear of error, expertise narrowing vision
Judgment	blindness to feedback, weak criticism, poor perspective-taking, ad hoc decisions	alert, reality-based, open to correction, able to decide proportionately	overanalysis, skepticism about everything, paralysis, trying to satisfy every perspective
Discipline	only working when inspired, irregular effort, weak continuation	regular work with breaks and recovery, enough consistency for real progress	rigidity, compulsive-ness, obsession

Table 6: Person — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow (part 1).

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Own Agenda	easily swayed, no stable direction, weak commitment	deliberate choice of direction, clear priorities, honest acceptance of costs	ruthlessness, disregard for others, scorched-earth behavior
Ambiguity Tolerance and Courage	hesitation, avoidance, fear of failure or exposure, premature retreat from uncertainty	willingness to act despite uncertainty, stress, and possible pushback	recklessness, thrill-seeking, mistaking conflict for value
Opportunity Exposure	invisibility, avoiding exposure, never becoming findable	being present where opportunities can arise, visible enough to be found and selected	overexposure, pushiness, exhausting others, moving too fast to build trust
Self-Regulation and Persistence	distraction, instability, premature abandonment, weak coping	sustained effort, stress handled without collapse, persistence with flexibility	ossification, deafness to feedback, life organized around one project to a destructive degree
Quitting Well	continuing dead projects too long, sunk-cost capture	clear kill criteria, willingness to stop when success is no longer plausible	quitting when work becomes tedious, difficult, or temporarily unrewarding

Table 7: Person — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow (part 2).

If you notice such an underflow or overflow during a project, do not panic. You have identified it — now you can design for it. Constraints often help — for example, shaping the environment to remove distractions, or getting social support such as accountability partners. Even a conversation with an AI can be useful. If necessary, you can change the scope or difficulty of the project, or delegate specific aspects of it in order to improve alignment without contorting yourself.[34]

People differ in which approaches to habit change work best. For some, streaks help — for others, they fail badly. Some can use things in moderation, others cannot. The supplemental materials, especially the Integration Worksheet, should help you determine what works for you. In general, habits are much easier to change through environmental design — making some behaviors easier and others harder — than through willpower alone.

Whatever you do, do it in practice while actually doing creative work, ideally in the context of a real project. A personality is not changed on a drafting board. Whether you are learning the domain, acquiring skills, generating ideas, or realizing, evaluating, and releasing projects, you will learn a great deal while doing the work. And your behavior will provide the feedback needed to improve.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter4

Where it fits into your current creative process:

1. Update your Creative System Map.
2. Ask yourself how the way you work interacts with the demands of what you are trying to create, not who you are in the abstract.
3. Mark whether it constrains output, i.e., is a potential candidate for an Integration Worksheet trial.

Chapter 5: Environment

«Environment is the invisible hand
that shapes human behavior.»
James Clear

Because behavior is a function of person and environment,[35] the environment has a strong influence on creative work. It can enable, distort, or inhibit it. Its influence is also persistent. Even when particular aspects matter only a little in isolation, they exert continuous pressure over time — like standing on a slope.

We are shaped by at least four interacting environments — the **physical**, **digital**, **social**, and **cultural**.

Left to themselves, these environments often interfere with the ability to be creative, usually by allowing too little time, effort, and focus for generating ideas and realizing projects. At the same time, environments are usually much easier and faster to change than habits, skills, or motivation. We can shape them into structures that support the right behavior — and thus the right output. That supports creative work, creates boundaries, and nudges us toward it in a way that is closer to our better selves[36] than to what is merely easy and satisfying in the short term.

Optimizing an environment can easily become a distraction in its own right. That is why the Integration Worksheet uses time-bounded trials and recommends pausing optimization after a successful iteration. The goal is incremental but more stable change over long time frames.

Some aspects of creativity can be improved directly by shaping the environment — for example by making idea capture effortless wherever you are. Others improve creativity indirectly by removing distractions, interruptions, and noise.

And in some cases, the target behavior cannot be improved directly at all. Then the conditions for that behavior have to be protected instead — for example, defending idle time to allow for inspiration and insights.

A well-shaped environment becomes a structure that makes many decisions unnecessary and leaves you with the focus and resources needed to create. Irrelevant aspects recede into the background, and the main friction during creative work comes from the work itself.

Unless they are periodically maintained, environments decay as entropy creeps in. Scheduling regular maintenance sessions, including at the end of each workday, can help here. More reminders are usually needed when the environment has just been changed and the new routines are not yet stable. That is an inescapable aspect of life.

Interruptions and Distractions

Creative work requires long stretches of uninterrupted time. This is true for learning, for idea generation, and especially for realization phases that demand sustained concentration and deep work[37] (see also Capabilities on page 77).

The problem is that most environments are structured against it. Interruptions and distractions come, e.g., from other people, digital systems, and oneself. Messages, notifications, ambient noise, visible objects with competing affordances, boredom-driven smartphone use, stray thoughts, and habitual task-switching all pull attention away from the work. Because these distractions are easier and more rewarding in the short term, they usually win unless the environment is deliberately shaped against them.

Interruptions and distractions should not be negotiated anew each time they arise. The more creative work depends on repeated acts of resistance, the more fragile it becomes.

You need to resist every time, the interruption or distraction just has to succeed once.

So as far as possible, they should be prevented by design, e.g., by limiting who can interrupt you, how they can do it, and which devices or channels remain accessible during work.

Distraction is not only active, but also passive. Objects in an environment have affordances — a pen says «*write*», a guitar says «*play*», or a phone says «*check me*». A small number of aligned affordances can support the work. Too many competing affordances create symbolic noise. Then the environment no longer points toward the task at hand, but toward many alternative actions. The result is often fragmentation, guilt, and reduced focus. In this sense, decluttering is not merely aesthetic — it reduces noise and makes concentration easier.

Some distractions are internal. Stray thoughts, reminders, or new ideas often pull attention away from the current task. In many cases, the best response is not suppression, but containment — jot the thought down to capture it, and return to the work. Once captured, it no longer has to be followed immediately.

A common problem is multitasking. Many people think they can work on several things at once, but what usually happens is rapid switching. The switching costs and attention residue from the previous task[38] break concentration, reduce quality, and make work feel far more effortful than the actual progress would justify. Genuine parallelization is only possible when one process can continue without active attention.[39] Focused work, by contrast, is usually best done one task at a time.

The aim is therefore not to eliminate every interruption forever, but to create environments in which uninterrupted work becomes normal enough for serious creative progress to occur.

Physical Environment

The physical environment covers everything from where you live to your immediate workspace.

Because you create within this setting again and again, its affordances have a strong cumulative effect on your work. It is also easy to get lost in creating a «*nice*» workspace that does not actually improve your creative work.

Relevant aspects of the physical environment are:

- **Location, location, location:** While the internet makes it easy to bridge distances, the right place for your creative endeavor still matters greatly. It affects, for example, which people you are likely to meet informally (e.g., fellow creatives in the same domain), which in-person trainings are available, access to mentors, competition, and the likelihood of serendipitous events.
- **Physical Stimulation:** The main risks here are distractions and interruptions — noise, smell, or even a low background hum whose effect often becomes obvious only when it stops. This also includes the affordances of objects in the environment — clutter on the desk, paintings of people who seem to look at you and make you feel observed,[40] and so on. At the same time, too little physical stimulation can make a place feel dead. So the real question is: What is essential and supports the work, and what is merely distraction?
- **Workplace Infrastructure:** Does the physical setting make the work easy to start and maintain? For example, is there a desk or workbench aligned with the task, where it is immediately possible to resume and where the tools are readily available («*A place for everything and everything in its place.*»)? Is the place ergonomic? That may seem irrelevant in the short term, but it is decisive for long-term creativity (see Staying Capable on page 77).

Digital Environment

The digital environment has become central in many creative domains — for learning, ideation, realization, and release. The ease of access and connection it provides cannot be overstated.

However, few things are as damaging to creativity as digital media — especially so-called social media. It is an always-available source of low-effort distraction, full of tempting time sinks and, worse, active interruptions through notifications.

The digital environment therefore has to be managed carefully so that interruptions and distractions are greatly reduced while the benefits remain. This is difficult, because it can feel like social exclusion — not being available 24/7, missing out, or not knowing what is happening. You are also working against the business model of powerful companies. In the attention economy, you are the product, not the customer, and what is sold is the gradual shaping of your attention and behavior.[41] But while you are a means to their ends, you are not helpless.

Relevant aspects of the digital environment are:

- **Digital Infrastructure:** Being selective about the digital environment, especially about the tools you use. Avoiding data islands and evaluating whether a tool actually supports creative work. The digital setup must enable work and then disappear into the background without much overhead, e.g., updates, backups, maintenance, or becoming an optimization trap. This is a high-risk area, because digital systems allow near-endless customization. Used deliberately, however, they can be extremely useful, e.g., for making reference material such as books, music, and other source material easily available.
- **Digital Stimulation:** While stimulation can be very useful, it has to be strongly regulated or it will take up too

much time and prevent the necessary idle cycles for creative work. This can be regulated by reserving time windows for digital stimulation and removing most of it outside those windows, and by setting clear boundaries who can reach you, when, and how. For example, by using access filters that allow notifications only from specific people. Idle time for ideation can be protected by making digital media inaccessible — e.g., switching on airplane mode and putting the phone in a drawer. This approach requires some tolerance for boredom, or the ability to surf the urge.

- **Backups and Data Protection:** Digital media depends on fragile infrastructure. With paper, a spilled glass of water may ruin one painting. Digitally, it can wipe out the work of decades. Given the value of digital devices, theft is also likely. Backups provide recovery if they are done early, often, with multiple independent copies stored in different locations, including offsite in case of fire, flood, or break-in. Semi-automation makes this almost effortless. Encryption[42] can create a barrier against misuse in case of theft, although it can also lock you out if you lose the key.

Social Environment

Besides judging whether your work is creative (the **field**, see Who Judges Creativity on page 15), other people can make your creative work possible — for example by being good colleagues, mentors, or advisers. They can support it technically, emotionally, or financially, for example as friends or patrons. Or they can stimulate it, for example as muses, communities, or fellow creatives.

However, other people can also stifle or extinguish creativity — for example through toxic workplaces or false friends who want you to remain predictable and «*in your place*».

Whether one likes it or not, most creative work has social components that must be handled if the work is to have impact. Thus, it has to be managed carefully — as with the digital environment, which often acts as a vector for the social environment.

While some highly focused creative people can appear socially inept, and some are, there are still ways to handle that issue. For example by choosing highly formalized domains (e.g., scientific work with established publishing workflows), by developing sufficient social skill to get one's ideas across, or by gaining strong promoters (e.g., partners, managers).

Relevant aspects of the social environment are:

- **Social Infrastructure:** What effect do the people in your life have on what you want to create? Who energizes you, who demotivates you? The issue is not whether you like someone, or whether their feedback is pleasant. What matters is the overall influence. Who wants you to improve and succeed, and who feels threatened and undermines you? Who gives truthful *and* useful feedback? And what is your role in their lives — what do you give back?
- **Social Stimulation:** Feedback from other people is a highly usable source of friction that keeps creative work aligned with reality. For example: Is it useful? Can it be understood? Without such friction — and without friction from the work itself — the risk is high that your own mind becomes the only standard. Then it begins to feed on its own prior thoughts, becomes self-referential, and mistakes coherence for truth. At the same time, clear boundaries are needed, because too much social stimulation or too many interruptions prevent creative focus. One useful standard is to treat creative work like teaching a class — you would not accept being interrupted during that time either. Social stimulation can also come through media

and bleed into work phases, e.g., via podcasts, social media, and similar streams.

- **Influence and Power:** Creative work is not judged in a vacuum. Whether ideas are heard, taken seriously, funded, protected, or implemented depends partly on merit, but also on social credibility, communication, and formal power. This matters especially in teamwork and hierarchical settings. Good supervisors or bosses protect the conditions for work, remove obstacles, reward merit, and remain open to challenge and feedback. Bad ones distort judgment, suppress disagreement, demand compliance, and throttle creative output. Many good ideas fail not because they are wrong, but because they cannot get across or cannot survive the structure around them.
- **Teamwork:** When the creative work cannot be done by a single person, finding and maintaining good teams becomes a necessary skill. The demands apply both to individual members — being easy to work with, acting with integrity, keeping commitments — and to the team as a whole — trust, constructive conflict, commitment, responsibility, and focus on results.[43] Risks include groupthink, social loafing, and overtrust. Fraud can also emerge easily when there is a motive, a rationalization, and an opportunity.[44]
- **Field Contact:** Contact with the target audience, e.g., readers or customers, and with its gatekeepers, e.g., publishers, is needed for evaluating and releasing a project. One needs to understand how the field sees, evaluates, and talks, what it wants and rejects, in order to determine what it actually needs and how to make the work understandable. Want and need can differ strongly, especially when the target audience lacks experience.

Cultural Environment

The cultural environment strongly shapes which kinds of creativity are welcomed and which are shut down — silently or loudly. Culture includes, for example, political orientation, ideology, moral foundations, cultural trends, and moral crises. It plays out from society at large down to local and organizational culture.

Cultural context also has practical consequences, because states and countries differ in taxes, laws, and regulation. For example, how easy is it to start a business, and how much of your money can you keep? Among others, lower taxes can mean more money to invest in creative projects.

Location has a strong effect — for example, the country you live in or the organization you work for — but cultures also overlap. As a result, there is often confusion about which values are actually relevant in a given situation.

Some cultures are actively toxic to creativity, especially when they distort the question of whether something works in order to maintain legitimacy and ideological conformity. Ideological conformity is especially corrosive to creativity — in the extreme, it can push science toward dogma and art toward propaganda. The hardest part here is not to define oneself as the opposition and spend one's energy fighting, but to ignore the corrosive system and do one's own, better work. Otherwise all the creative energy is co-opted by being against something, not by creating something worthwhile.

Because creativity is ultimately evaluated by output, and because output is throttled or extinguished in such environments, it is usually more sustainable to withdraw creative energy from corrosive systems and reinvest it in generative ones.[45]

Relevant aspects of the cultural environment are:

- **Relationship to Creativity:** On the positive end, creativity is cherished, there are no taboo questions, assumptions can be challenged, feedback is open, effects are evaluated critically, including side effects and long-term effects, there is a constructive error culture in which solving the problem matters more than assigning blame, and epistemic humility takes precedence over ideological conformity. On the negative end, ideology or politics distort the design space through favored causes, taboo questions, unchallengeable assumptions, selective funding, distorted standards, and cancel culture.

  The real litmus test is whether creativity is valued in general, or only a specific kind of creativity.

  Closely related is whether merit is rewarded, or whether other factors dominate. A useful test is whether selection, recognition, funding, and promotion track the quality of the work — or whether they are distorted by ideological conformity, patronage, or quotas based on traits irrelevant to the work. When merit is displaced by irrelevant criteria, evaluation becomes noisy, trust erodes, and creativity is pushed away from excellence and toward compliance.[46]

  These questions are answered by behavior, not by words.[47] For example, in organizations, mission statements matter less than who gets promoted, what gets rewarded, and which ideas survive.

- **Cultural Stimulation:** Cultural trends or the zeitgeist can stimulate projects, especially when the time is right for certain ideas. But they can also be highly distracting when outrage or manufactured conflict between major camps drags you in and wastes both time and energy. Outrage can become a motivational black hole, nihilism a demotivating tar pit, and trends can override individual judgment.
- **Subcultures:** Groups or places within a larger context that operate by different norms.[48] These can include **Pockets**

of Excellence[49] or looser constellations of people rather than full tribes. They are usually fragile and time-limited, but they show that culture is not destiny.

Common Failure Modes in Environment

Many things can go wrong in the creative environment, but major failure modes are treating the environment as fixed, optimizing the environment instead of doing the work, and tolerating chronic interruption as normal.

Treating the Environment as Fixed

Some people treat the environment like weather — something that simply happens. But whether physical, digital, social, or cultural, there are usually ways to make the environment work *with* you, perhaps even *for* you. Simply accepting it as given means neglecting a major factor in creative behavior. While you usually cannot make radical changes — and often should not even if you could — you can run trials and then see what improves your environment.

Optimizing the Environment, Not the Work

Because there is no perfection, there is also no natural endpoint when you try to improve the environment. And improving it is often fun. So some people get lost in automation, new setups, and endless refinement (see also Tools on page 87). Related to optimization is the temptation to choose aesthetics over function. Things look good, but do not actively support the work.

The value of the environment lies in what it does for you — here, whether it improves the quality and quantity of your creative work. That has to remain the end goal. If optimization is a temptation for you, it needs hard constraints — time, scope, and frequency. Changes usually need some time

before their effects can be judged correctly. Otherwise, novelty is too easily mistaken for improvement.

Tolerating Chronic Interruption as Normal

If the social environment expects instant availability and instant replies, it can be difficult to carve out the uninterrupted and undistracted time needed for creative work. And there is a strong external pressure to remain available, and likely also a strong internal drive to check for messages constantly (fear of missing out). Because so much in ideation and realization depends on protected time, a change in perspective is needed — 24/7 availability should no longer be treated as normal,[50] but as detrimental to serious work.

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

Underflows and overflows can happen in all of these environments — physical, digital, social, and cultural — see Table 8.

Precisely because environments are easier to change than the person, sweeping changes can become tempting. However, it is usually better to observe for a while which environment or which aspect of it is constraining the creative system, and then make small changes in order to see their effects. Otherwise, sweeping changes alter too much at once to tell what helped and what did not, and there is a greater risk of drifting back into dysfunctional behaviors or environments.

With misaligned environments, the options are usually to accept them, change them, or leave them — complaining merely prolongs the misery. In genuinely toxic environments, the first two are often not real options. In that case, creating the time and energy to look for a way out may be better. That means leaving intelligently, with options and future perspectives intact. It is bad enough that toxic environments poison the present, they should not poison the future as well.

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Physical Location and Infrastructure	wrong place, weak setup, high start-up costs, poor ergonomics	place and setup make starting and continuing work easy	pristine or overengineered setup becomes more important than using it
Physical Stimulation	environment is dead, uninspiring, or missing cues for work	stimulation is aligned with the work and low in irrelevant noise	clutter, visual noise, and competing affordances fragment attention
Digital Infrastructure	default tools or settings limit work, files are scattered, backups neglected	selected, stable, low-overhead digital setup with reliable backups	endless customization, maintenance overhead, unstable routines
Digital Stimulation	too little useful input or contact, unnecessary isolation	bounded input, strong protection of deep-work and idle phases	notifications, doomscrolling, constant checking, broken attention
Social Infrastructure and Collaboration	isolation, weak support, missing mentors, poor collaboration	supportive, challenging, complementary relationships and teams	too many interactions, meetings, obligations, or social costs
Influence, Leadership	work is ignored or discounted	fair evaluation, useful leadership, enough influence	politics, status insulation, or deference distort judgment
Field Contact	work reaches the field too late	reality-based feedback	crowd-pleasing distorts judgment
Cultural Relationship to Creativity	creativity is neglected, distrusted, or given no real room	open inquiry, challengeable assumptions, merit-based evaluation, room for good work	ideology, conformity pressure, taboo questions, and distorted standards
Subcultures and Zeitgeist	no pockets of excellence, little contact with live currents	selective contact with the zeitgeist and access to fruitful subcultures	hype capture, outrage cycles, splintering, or interchange-able work driven by trend-following

Table 8: Environment — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow.

But that is a rare and extreme case. Ideally, the environment is simply an invisible hand that does not interrupt or distract from the work, but is curated to support it subtly.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter5

Where it fits into your current creative process:

1. Update your Creative System Map.
2. Mark whether it constrains output, i.e., is a potential candidate for an Integration Worksheet trial.

Chapter 6: Capabilities

> «We must do all we can do
> without destroying our ability
> to keep doing it.»
> *«Xenocide» by Orson Scott Card*

Capabilities depend on both the person and the environment.[51] Changes in either change the range of what can be created and how much friction comes with it. They also impose hard limits. Some ideas fail because the system currently cannot produce them.

However, as with person attributes and environmental factors, capabilities matter only when they actually constrain what can be done now — not as abstract ideals to be developed indefinitely.

Thus, while reading this chapter, it is useful to ask where a lack of capability is currently constraining your creative work.

Staying Capable

Nothing in this book matters if body or mind stop functioning well enough to allow for creative work. Creative capability depends on both physical and mental health. When either is impaired, what remains possible shrinks rapidly — sometimes to zero.

This is easy to ignore while things still work. Health is mostly invisible until it fails. Then it becomes central. While many limitations can be worked around, it is usually better to not create those constraints in the first place.

Maintenance is cheaper and easier than repair.

Physical health is often the first thing sacrificed when creative work intensifies. Sleep and rest erode first, then nutrition, movement, and recovery. Energy and concentration drop, and these are often more limiting than mere time. People can overclock for a while and push through projects by spending resources faster than they can replenish them, but the body usually takes that back within days. Repeated often enough, this damages the very capacity that creative work depends on.

A typical case is the all-nighter after an already full day of work. Sometimes that is forced by a deadline. But often it happens because the work suddenly flows and stopping feels dangerous. Yet the gain is usually local, while the cost spreads into the next one or two days. In many cases, stopping, noting the current state and next step, and returning the following day produces better work overall. What makes this difficult is that overreach is rewarding in the short term — the work moves, ideas come, momentum feels real. The damage appears later.

Mental health is vulnerable for similar reasons. Creative work contains uncertainty, risk, self-exposure, frustration, and the possibility of failure. It also tends to create the harshest critic imaginable — the one in one's own head.[52] It is also often tied to physical health — once it declines, mental resilience usually declines with it.

Warning signs often appear at the extremes. On one side, the work becomes terribly important — humor disappears, perspective narrows, and everything begins to hinge on the project. On the other side, meaning drains away and the work starts to feel pointless.[53] Both states reduce creative capability.

Creative work can also erode the other supports that keep a person psychologically stable — family, friendships, leisure, beauty, play, and ordinary life. That is dangerous because creative work cannot be made risk-free. One can improve the

odds of success, but not guarantee it. When the work fails — and some will — and nothing else remains intact enough to absorb the blow, the fall is much harder.

The point, then, is not merely to work hard, but to remain capable of working over time.[54] Sleep, nutrition, breaks, break days, play, and unrelated activities are not luxuries added afterward. They are part of the maintenance cost of creative capability. Neglect them long enough, and the work begins to consume the very conditions that make it possible.

So do what the work requires, but not at the cost of the capacity required to continue doing it.[55]

Working Capably

Working capably requires two things — focused hard work and defended time.

Focused Hard Work

Creative work requires focused effort at multiple stages[56] — when learning a demanding domain, training difficult skills, solving difficult problems, or realizing a complex project.

- **Deep Work:** One useful concept here is Newport's deep work:[57] «*professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit*», which «*create new value,* [and] *improve your skill*». In contrast, shallow work consists of tasks that are not cognitively demanding and «*tend not to create much new value in the world*». For creative work, this distinction matters because much of what is central — learning, ideation, problem solving, realization — depends on sustained concentration. Deep work requires both personal intention and an environment protected from interruption and distraction.

- **Prioritization:** Hard work alone is not enough. It has to be directed at the right problems. Otherwise, it is easy to spend serious effort on tasks that are convenient, attractive, or even demanding, but not central to the project. The question is not only whether you work hard, but whether you work hard on what matters most.
- **Energy and Focus:** Especially when creative work is done alongside a normal job or other obligations, energy and focus are often more limiting than time. A person may technically have an hour available and still be unable to do meaningful work in it. Restructuring the day so that the most demanding creative work is done when focus is highest often makes a larger difference than adding more clock time (see Defended Time on page 81).
- **Activation Costs:** The main friction point is often not the work itself, but starting it. What is usually called lack of motivation is often a problem of activation energy, with motivation more often being a consequence of beginning the work rather than a precondition for starting it. Once the work has started and begun to move, continuing becomes much easier. For that reason, it helps to lower the cost of re-entry — for example, stop while you still know what to do next («*downward slope*»[58]), prepare the workplace for continuation («*clear to neutral*»[59]), and focus on the first concrete step rather than the whole session.[60]
- **Flow:** Ideally, focused work sometimes turns into flow — a state of total involvement, clear goals, absorbed attention, and an altered sense of time. Flow cannot be commanded, but it can be made more likely when skill and difficulty are well matched, the task is neither too easy nor too hard, and feedback is sufficiently immediate. Some activities provide that feedback naturally — others require the person to set explicit criteria and monitor them. In writing, for example, this may mean having a clear sense of

what counts as acceptable quality at that stage (see Project Evaluation on page 209).

Defended Time

Creative work takes a great deal of time — especially the kind of focused work required for learning, generating ideas, and realizing projects. That time has to be made and defended. Without deliberate protection, it is usually consumed by requests, distractions, interruptions, and low-value obligations.

The scale of time required to become very good is easy to underestimate. The exact number differs by domain, but expertise takes years, not weeks. Figure 6 illustrates this with the familiar 10,000-hour benchmark using chess as an example.[61]

As the available time is usually scarce, increasing usable time directly increases what a person can do creatively. Few

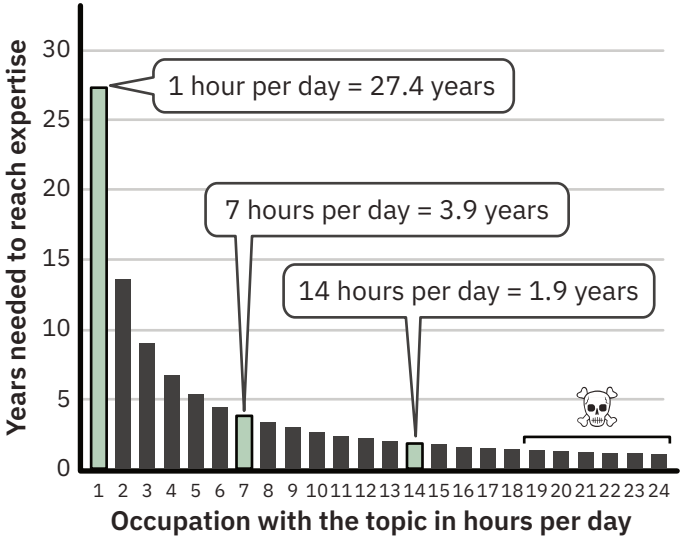
Years needed to reach expertise
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
1 hour per day = 27.4 years
7 hours per day = 3.9 years
14 hours per day = 1.9 years
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24
Occupation with the topic in hours per day

Figure 6: What approximately 10,000 hours to reach expertise means in required years of learning depending on the number of hours invested per day.

people, however, are able to spend seven hours or more on creative work, unless that is also their profession, e.g., studying professionally or working in the domain. So the issue is not only having time, but protecting the time we have.

- **Accurate Time Assessment:** Most people are worse than they think at estimating where their time goes. Activities are remembered in distorted ways depending on how pleasant, aversive, or absorbing they are. Tracking actual time use for a while is therefore often more useful than trying to reason about it abstractly.
- **Making Time:** Time can be freed by removing drains, preventing sinks, and collapsing or delegating low-value tasks. Social media, computer games, and other absorbing activities often consume far more time than expected. Likewise, automating recurring tasks, combining compatible activities,[62] or limiting enjoyable but expansive tasks through time-boxing[63] can create room for serious work.
- **Day Structure:** Creative work is especially vulnerable to low energy and reduced concentration. For many people, this means that the first usable hours of the day are disproportionately valuable. Work that requires focus should therefore be placed where energy is highest, with less demanding tasks moved later. Night owls are a special case, but even there the appeal of the night may stem less from circadian rhythm than from the conditions it creates — quiet, low interruption, reduced visibility, and lower stimulation. Those conditions can often be recreated deliberately.[64]
- **Fallow Time, Breaks, and Break Days:** Defended time is not only time for effort. It also includes time that is deliberately left unassigned. Ideas, mental consolidation, recovery, and shifts in perspective often require idle cycles rather than directed effort. Such time is easily dismissed as frivolous because it does not look productive. But with-

out it, both insight and long-range adaptability deteriorate.

Breaks and break days are equally necessary. Working past recovery may feel productive in the moment, but usually reduces capability over the following hours or days.[65] Rest is not a reward for having worked — it is maintenance of the capacity to work. The same applies to breaks — they work better when you actually step away from the workplace.[66]

This also means distinguishing genuine rest from disguised avoidance. Fallow time is not procrastination, and recovery is not the same as flooding yourself with external input. Social media, videos, podcasts, and similar stimuli do not provide the same kind of mental recovery as unpaced idle time.[67] Walks, baths, showers, naps, meditation, yoga, solitude, or simply drinking tea without additional input are often far more restorative and might lead to new insights and inspirations.[68]

Productivity that works over decades therefore requires more than efficient scheduling. It requires defended time for work, defended time for recovery, and defended time for nothing in particular. Without that, short-term throughput may rise for a while, but insight, adaptability, and long-term creative capacity decline.

Building Capabilities

It makes little sense to increase capabilities in the abstract. Before investing heavily in new ones, diagnose the actual bottleneck. Then choose the most viable route — learn, reduce scope, delegate, collaborate, redesign the environment, or extend capability through tools. Learning is powerful, but it is also slow. Often the better question is not «*What should I master next?*» but «*What is the most viable way to remove this constraint?*»

- **Learning Deliberately:** Acquiring knowledge and skill increases independence, expands the design and solution space,[69] and improves judgment. It also means that you can contribute something real to collaborative work. But learning only pays if it is done deliberately. Reality-based feedback is needed — through direct application, deliberate practice,[70] correction, and good teaching.[71] Because learning things incorrectly is costly and hard to undo, it pays to take responsibility for one's own learning[72] and to seek the best material, teachers,[73] and mentors available.
- **Useful Learning:** Not all learning has the same value. Some knowledge decays quickly — some remains useful for decades. Transferable capabilities are especially valuable — communication, scientific thinking,[74] numeracy,[75] psychology,[76] and other skill combinations that remain useful across domains. A distinctive capability stack[77] is often more valuable than trying to become the best at one isolated thing.
- **Delegation, Collaboration, and Tools:** Capabilities do not always need to be built internally. They can also be extended through collaboration, delegation, and tools. Working with other people is one of the fastest ways to increase capability, but it requires compatibility, communication,[78] and judgment, as well as the ability to get one's ideas across.[79] These skills can themselves be developed.[80] Some capabilities can also be externalized into tools, notes, and systems, including AI (see Tools on page 87). The goal is not to know everything yourself, but to be able to produce good work reliably.
- **Meta-Capability:** A crucial meta-capability is understanding one's own behavior without drifting into rumination, sterile abstraction, or mere activity for its own sake. Behavior-based trials and reflection across multiple trials show what actually works for your creative work (see Integration Worksheet).

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

If you notice that capabilities are constraining a specific project through underflow or overflow (see Table 9), you can intervene through the person, the environment, or the work itself — for example by changing the project, reducing its scope, or delegating parts of it.

As with the other elements, small changes followed by observation usually lead to better and more stable results.

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Physical and Mental Health	low energy, poor sleep, deteriorating focus, fragile mood, reduced capacity	health is sufficiently protected to sustain work over time	overcontrol, health obsession, self-monitoring replaces work
Focused Work and Follow-Through	shallow effort, weak concentration, procrastination, little real progress	regular deep work, clear start points, sustained progress	overwork, all-nighters, grinding past recovery, effort detached from priorities
Defended Time, Recovery, and Fallow Time	too little defended time, no real breaks, no idle cycles	enough protected time for work, enough recovery and fallow time for insight	overplanned days, no spontaneity, no recuperation, every gap filled
Learning and Skill Acquisition	weak fundamentals, reluctance to learn, capabilities lag behind aims	deliberate learning aligned with current creative demands	endless learning, collecting knowledge without application, capability building becomes avoidance
Communication and Collaboration	poor externalization, weak feedback loops, inability to work with others	clear communication, useful feedback, productive cooperation when needed	communication displaces making, social process replaces creative output

Table 9: Capabilities — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow.

Over time, this allows you both to discover and to shape the conditions under which you can do creative work well.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter6

Where it fits into your current creative process:

1. Update your Creative System Map.
2. Mark whether it constrains output, i.e., is a potential candidate for an Integration Worksheet trial.

Meta: Tools

«Lo! Men have become the tools of their tools.»
Henry David Thoreau

Tools have always been part of creative work.[81] Even embodied forms of creativity rely on tools, materials, spaces, and supports. This includes the body itself as a tool, e.g., in ballet or singing, but also costumes, instruments, stages, rooms, and other enabling conditions.

For good reason — tools extend capability, shape what can be done and how easily it can be done. But tools are means, not ends. The right question is not which tool is most impressive, but which tool actually helps produce better work with less unnecessary friction.

Tools Should Serve the Work

The value of a tool lies in what you can actually achieve with it — the outcomes it enables, the friction it removes, and its availability when needed. This depends on the person and may not match what is commonly promoted or recommended.[82]

In general, there is no single best tool. Requirements differ across people, tasks, and stages of development. Even the best tool for you may change as your skills, goals, and workflow change. Thus, the search for a perfect tool is a graveyard for time and creativity, as is the debate over whether digital or analog tools are inherently better.[83] Being tool-agnostic and choosing something that works well enough for you is usually more effective.

Often, tools can be rented, borrowed, or accessed through maker spaces, fab labs, or similar settings. While long-term use is required for proficiency, renting tools first or using trial

versions helps to determine whether a tool is actually right for your purposes.

Tools Shape the Work

Tools bias what you do. They make certain things easy or hard and, in a sense, want to be used in a particular way. For example, a notepad makes sketching easy — a notes app on a smartphone that mainly supports text does not. So depending on the capture tool you use, you may end up with more sketches or more text.

These affordances shape the design space, beautifully put by the familiar adage: «*If all you have is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail*».

Tools also exert pull even when unused, creating sensory load and distraction (see Environment on page 63). Selecting the right tools for your kind of work — and being careful about which tools remain visible in the environment — is therefore crucial.

Higher-quality tools usually require more knowledge and skill to use them correctly, safely, or at their full potential. A professional camera with many options, for example, demands more of the user than an AI-controlled smartphone camera. Tools also require maintenance, and higher-quality tools are often less tolerant of mistakes. This can encourage further learning, but it can also become a frustrating and costly detour.

Tools Require Judgment

Low-quality tools interrupt workflow, make failure more likely, and often cost more in the long run.[84] At the same time, the threshold for a workable tool is often lower than people expect — too cheap creates distracting tool friction, but too expensive can create hesitation, avoidance, or fragili-

ty.[85] Second-hand tools are often especially valuable because they remove the pristine barrier and make higher quality accessible at lower cost.

Tools can often be adapted to the user. Done well, this improves the fit between tool and user and increases ease of use. A camera, for example, can be configured so that the functions relevant to the user's actual use cases are immediately available. But adaptability is not a value in itself. It also poses a major distraction risk — for example, endlessly fiddling with settings instead of creating.

Getting used to specific tools is useful, because attunement to a tool often results in better work. The risk is a workflow that depends too heavily on very specific tools, or on tools that are hard to replace because of cost, availability, or licenses tied to a particular employer.[86] Subscription models usually mean loss of access if payments stop or the company folds. This is especially damaging with data islands, including proprietary file formats, or cloud-only solutions, because they can prevent access to your own work. Follow-up costs in the form of accessories are also often underestimated.

AI as a Special Case

Artificial intelligence can extend capability quickly, especially by providing feedback, variation, and access to usable knowledge. However, making effective use of it requires a working understanding of its specific strengths and limitations.

It also raises a deeper question about what creativity means, because it can shift the user from maker to director, manager, or patron. For many creatives, the joy and meaning lie in the making itself, which AI use can undermine.

See also the Afterword by AI on page 245.

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

Tools have their own characteristic underflow and overflow problems (see Table 10).

In general — whether it is a software suite, brush and canvas, hammer and chisel, or sewing machine and fabric — tools can both enable and constrain you.

Ideally, they grow with you, and you with them.

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Tool Fit	mismatch the work, make capture or realization awkward, or remain unavailable when needed	tools fit the task and the person well enough to support reliable output	tool-chasing, prestige buying, or identity attachment replaces actual creating
Affordances and Demands	tools are too weak, too crude, or too poorly understood to support the work	affordances match the work, and demands stay within manageable skill and maintenance costs	tools overcomplicate the work, demand too much upkeep, or pull attention into their own logic
Adaptation and Control	tools are left in friction-heavy default states	tools are adjusted enough to reduce unnecessary friction and support flow	endless customization, tinkering, and setup work displace actual creation
Dependency Risk	no attunement to any tools; workflows remain clumsy and replaceable, but inefficient	familiarity improves speed and quality without creating lock-in	workflow becomes fragile through dependence on specific tools, subscriptions, platforms, or file formats
AI Use	refusal to use AI even where it would clearly help with feedback, iteration, or knowledge access	selective use of AI to extend capability while keeping the creator close to the work	overreliance, deskilling, or drift into managerial distance from the making itself

Table 10: Tools — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow.

Framework: Ideas

«Your mind is filled with new ideas.
Do not let them go to waste.»
unknown

There is no creativity without ideas. But for something to be new and useful, the ideas need a strong foundation and must survive contact with reality.

Creative projects also rarely depend on a single idea. A book needs not just a plot, but characters, settings, scenes, and lines. A scientific study requires decisions about methods, measures, and analysis. An app idea comes with design questions, edge cases, and technical constraints.

Ideation is therefore a continuous process, not a single event.

That process does not end with **generating ideas**. Ideas also have to be **captured** and **collected**. Otherwise they are forgotten, distorted, or unavailable when they are needed.[87] Creating the infrastructure to capture ideas immediately and store them in a usable collection turns ideation from accident into craft. Done well, many of the ideas needed for a project are already there when realization begins.

Realization will still require further ideas and on-the-fly problem solving. In fact, it often reveals that having the initial idea was the easy part. But if the right kinds of ideas were generated, captured, and collected, realization no longer starts from nothing. It starts with material that has already taken shape.

Chapter 7: Generating Ideas

> «The great composer does not set to work because he is inspired, but becomes inspired because he is working. Beethoven, Wagner, Bach and Mozart settled down day after day to the job in hand with as much regularity as an accountant settles down each day to his figures. They didn't waste time waiting for inspiration.»
>
> *Ernest Newman*

Where do ideas come from? Some people have them while walking, others in the shower. Some need peace and quiet so imagination can run free. Some need hard constraints or the material in front of them to reveal gaps and possibilities. Others generate ideas in interaction with other people or by reaching into their emotions.

Whatever the origin, it helps to look at idea generation in context — what ideas need in order to arise, and how they improve.

A cyclic model of ideation[88] distinguishes five recurring phases — occupation with the subject, incubation, insight, evaluation, and elaboration (see Figure 7).

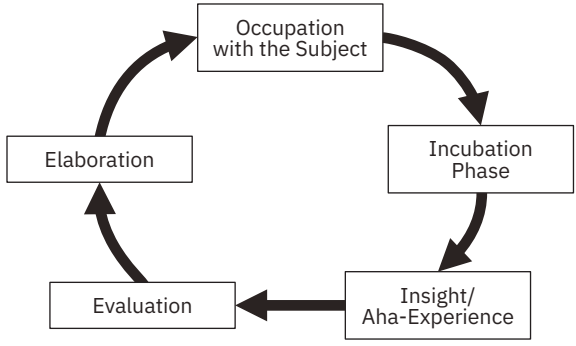

Figure 7: Cyclic Model of Ideation based on Wallas (1926; see also Csikszentmihalyi, 1996)

Each pass through the cycle can move the work one step further, after which the cycle begins again. In practice, these stages can overlap, loop, or occur in parallel.

The model highlights three basic facts about ideation — first, it requires knowledge and time, second, inspiration and insight cannot be forced, and third, ideas improve through repeated cycles of evaluation and elaboration.

Thus, ideation is not a matter of luck or inspiration alone. It can be designed for.

Preconditions for Ideation

The following conditions strongly influence how many ideas are generated and how good they are.

Knowledge for Ideas

Occupation with the subject is a precondition for generating ideas — or rather, for generating ideas that actually work. This usually benefits from a good analysis (see Understanding a Situation on page 219) so that the situation is fully grokked.[89]

Without enough understanding, idea generation is easy and coherent. Constraints, requirements, and exceptions are not yet known, so there are few inner contradictions and little early filtering of unworkable ideas. That makes ideation feel easy and fun — until the beautiful ideas shatter on contact with reality.[90]

The opposite problem also exists. Too much knowledge can impede ideation just as effectively — especially knowledge of what supposedly cannot be done. Ideas are discarded too quickly because the mind generates reasons why they will fail rather than ways in which they might be made to work. In effect, squelchers and killer phrases[91] become automatic thoughts.

So what is needed is balance — enough knowledge to understand, but enough openness to keep asking how something might be made to work.

Unassigned Attention

Unbounded ideation, problem-finding, and Open Creative Ideation (see Ideation Types by Project Stage on page 97) require unstructured attention. The mind has to be left free to wander, e.g., no music, no podcasts, and no screens. Such periods support not only ideation, but also incubation, consolidation, recombination, recalibration, and long-horizon thinking.

In the short term, however, these states often feel aversive or wasteful. So most people pre-allocate their attention automatically. They fill idle moments to escape boredom, restlessness, low arousal, or the darker places a wandering mind might enter. That removes short-term discomfort, but it also removes powerful sources of ideas (see also Interruptions and Distractions on page 64).

Thus, such idle time has to be actively protected. Walking, bathing, showering, lying in bed before sleep or after waking, repetitive exercise, or eating alone can all serve this function — but only if they are left uninterrupted. The point is to stop interfering with the conditions under which ideas tend to arise.

More focused forms of ideation can also be supported by Creativity Methods and Techniques (see page 103). Their value often lies less in what they directly produce than in creating legitimate time to pause, explore, and think.

Protection from Overcontrol

Inspiration and insight are highly valued in creative work and need to be protected from overcontrol.

Inspiration is related to intensity, coherence, and the quality of work. Without it, the upper limit is often competent work. But because it is not under voluntary control, it cannot serve as a criterion for action. Deliberately waiting for inspiration often only ensures that nothing is created.

Insight, especially in problem solving, also depends on breaks with idle time. Sustained conscious effort narrows the search space, but insight solutions often lie outside that cone. A break reduces fixation on previous wrong attempts and allows the search to reopen. One reason insight problems are hard is that they provide almost no feedback — until the last step, you often do not know how close you are to a solution.[92]

Both are **second-order phenomena** — they depend on weak signals, latency, and emergent coherence. The more directly they are watched, forced, or expected, the less likely they become.

What they need is prior occupation with the subject, followed by **conditions in which the mind is left alone** long enough to reorganize. Expectation interferes. Thinking *«I am walking without distraction, so the solution should come now»* makes inspiration and insight less likely, not more.

It therefore works better to make such conditions, where the mind is left alone, ordinary rather than special. Regularly walk part of the way to work. Leave some transitions unfilled. Let idle cycles occur often enough that they are no longer burdened by expectation.

This cannot guarantee inspiration or insight, but it can make both more likely. See also the Integration Worksheet examples 5 and 6 for a bad and a good trial.

Ideation Types by Project Stage

Ideation can take different forms and produce different kinds of ideas. To be useful, it has to fit the stage of the project.

At first, ideation is usually **unbounded — free ideation** and **problem-finding**. Once a project is chosen, ideation becomes more focused — **divergent exploration**, **creative problem solving**, and later **classical problem solving**.

Thus, as the project becomes more defined, ideation usually becomes more structured, deliberate, feasibility-bound, evaluative, and often more collaborative. This shift also changes which Creative Engines (see page 99) and **ideation modes** are most useful.

- **Free Ideation** (unbounded, e.g., «*Where did that come from?*»): Ideas that simply appear during idle times — walking, showering, incubation, or relaxed drift. They are intuitive, unconstrained, opportunistic, personal, and often unconscious. Still, they are shaped by prior knowledge, experience, and stimulation. Discovery modes provide much of this raw material.
- **Problem-Finding** (opportunity discovery, e.g., «*What do people need?*»): Sensing a gap, tension, need, or possibility. Often the task is not yet to solve a problem, but to identify the right problem. That is harder than it sounds, because people often know only what they want, not what they actually need.[93] The result can be solving the wrong problem or settling for incremental improvement where something more fundamental is possible. Associative Drift (spotting weak signals), Serendipitous Collision, Emotional-Motivational Ignition (sensing tension), and Interpersonal Synchrony Ideation (sensing needs) fit here. Constraint-Driven Exploration does not — it responds to defined problems, it does not discover them.

Once the project is more defined, **focused ideation** becomes more important:

- **Divergent Exploration** (open creative ideation, e.g., «*What could this become?*»): Generating many possibilities around a particular project without worrying too early about constraints. This is useful when shaping a concept or exploring directions. Associative Drift, Internal Simulation, Interpersonal Synchrony Ideation, Externalization (sketching branches), and sometimes Kinesthetic-Embodied Ideation fit well here. Common failure modes are premature filtering, stopping too early, and rule-bound thinking.
- **Creative Problem-Solving** (constrained creativity, e.g., «*What is feasible inside the real limits?*»): Used when the concept is defined and a workable solution is needed. The aim is to make the idea real — for example by building the first prototype. This usually moves the work toward engineering or craftsmanship. Domain and field affordances matter strongly here (see Ignoring the Domain and Field Affordances on page 107), the focus has to be on the hard problems (see Working on the Wrong Problem on page 104), and goal conflicts often appear. Structure modes are especially useful — discovery and state modes are usually too diffuse unless they feed the process indirectly.
- **Classical Problem-Solving** (implementation fixing, e.g., «*How do I solve this?*»): Ideas needed during mid- to late-stage work — fixing bugs, solving scene problems, improving performance, or repairing breakdowns. Here the goal and rules are often clearer, so the solution space can be decomposed into subproblems. Structure modes dominate, especially Internal Simulation and Externalization.

Creative Engines

Ideas can be generated by at least three creative engines — **discovery**, which provides raw material, **structure**, which shapes it, and **state**, which shifts the system so new material becomes possible.[94]

Discovery

Structure

State

People differ in which engine they naturally begin with, but most projects move through different engines and modes. This often happens unconsciously — an idea appears through drift (discovery), then gets externalized, refined, constrained, and tested (structure). But engines and modes can also be shifted deliberately when the current one stalls.

Whether a mode works depends on the individual, the domain and field (see Ignoring the Domain and Field Affordances on page 107), and the stage of the project (see Ideation Types by Project Stage on page 97).

Discovery (provides raw material)

Discovery works through associative emergence — fast, unbidden, intuitive, emotional, and sensory. Ideas appear when the mind makes surprising connections through drift, serendipity, memory, or emotional flashes. This engine is highly state-sensitive — anxiety tends to collapse it, playfulness expands it, anger sharpens it, sadness can slow it down but deepen it.

Its starting point is the spark — ideas that simply arrive while walking, showering, relaxing, or drifting. Discovery

thrives on fragments, glimpses, and intuition. Pushing harder usually does not help — loosening does.

It fits domains that depend on surprise, novelty, and emergence, such as fiction writing or early-stage startup ideation. Structure comes later.

Modes are:

- **Associative Drift (AD):** Ideas from loose, spontaneous wandering. Best for ill-defined questions, fresh angles, or situations where analytic pushing has stalled. Enter it by lowering cognitive pressure and allowing relaxed alertness. For example, through gentle idleness (walk, shower), reduced sensory demands, blocking «*non-doing phases*», and preventing interruptions.
- **Serendipitous Collision (SC):** Ideas from unexpected contact between unrelated materials. A felt «*click*» signals relevance. Best for conceptual innovation, metaphorical insight, and unexpected recombination. Enter it through broad exposure, analogy, field-jumping, and mixed input. For example, through browsing, wandering, mixing domains, using analogies and mashups, broad reading, or visiting stimulating environments (e.g., libraries).
- **Inner Retrieval (IR):** Ideas drawn from memory, identity, emotion, or personal history. Best for value-laden, emotionally stuck, or autobiographical material. Enter it through quiet, inward-facing conditions and reflective prompts such as «*What does this remind me of?*» or «*Where have I felt this before?*»

Structure (shapes the material)

Structure works through deliberate recombination and simulation — slow, methodical, analytical, and reflective. Ideas emerge when a problem is defined, organized, and deliberately explored.

Its starting point is existing material. The work is to shape, formalize, simulate, refine, reframe, and recombine it into something usable. Structure thrives on visible organization, questions, and constraints. Progress comes from method — e.g., lists, graphs, tables — rather than surprise.

It fits domains that require coherence, rigor, or precision, such as engineering, scientific research, and programming.

Modes are:

- **Internal Simulation (IS):** Mental rehearsal, imagery, and model-based inner testing. It can involve any sense — visual imagery, imagined taste, texture, or aroma in cooking, or sound in music. It also includes mental models, for example how a machine, process, or experiment will run, or how users will behave. Best for sequencing, systems thinking, and coherence problems. Enter it through a quiet environment for the relevant sense, and then start imagining it.
- **Externalization (EX):** Sketching, outlining, writing, diagramming, or prototyping. Best for messy, multivariable, or material-dependent problems, and anything that needs to be explored through doing. Enter it by working with the material, e.g., via sketching, prototyping, or drafting.
- **Constraint-Driven Exploration (CD):** Working by imposing tight limits, rules, or boundaries. Best for overly open problems, or tasks requiring precision or efficiency. Enter it by identifying the relevant constraints or setting tight limits — for example regarding time, rules, or number of elements.
- **Deliberate Combinatorial Search (DCS):** Systematic recombination of variables and options. Best for redesigns, variants, structured exploration, and option spaces. Enter it by defining the relevant constraints, breaking the problem down, mapping the variables, and recombining them systematically.

- **Representational Shift (RS):** Reframing the problem by changing metaphor, perspective, scale, or assumptions. Best for dead ends, hidden assumptions, and wrong-question problems. Enter it by writing down the current framing and asking questions such as: «*What if the opposite is true?*», «*What is the real problem?*», or «*Which assumptions depend on something else that we might change?*»

State (shifts the system)

State works through affect, embodiment, and interpersonal attunement. Here, ideas depend on entering a state in which new material becomes available.

Its starting point is a shift — emotional, physical, or social. Ideas emerge through movement, resonance, urgency, emotional charge, or co-regulation with another person. In this engine, novelty becomes available because the system itself changes.

It fits domains grounded in embodiment, performance, or affective immediacy, such as improv, dance, acting, and some collaborative design work.

Modes are:

- **Emotional-Motivational Ignition (EMI):** Ideas driven by frustration, longing, urgency, obsession, or personal meaning. Best for problems needing narrative force, meaning, or direction, personal projects, or work requiring passion. Enter it by reconnecting with why the idea matters — through personal stakes, frustration, longing, values alignment, urgency, or meaningful obstacles.
- **Kinesthetic-Embodied Ideation (KEI):** Ideas driven by movement, gesture, physical enactment, or spatial change. Best for spatial, procedural, narrative-flow, or movement-dependent problems, sequences, interactions, or anything

that has to be *felt*. Enter it through walking, gesturing, acting it out, or moving materials around.

- **Interpersonal Synchrony Ideation (ISI):** Ideas emerging through attunement with another person — shared pace, shared attention, resonance, and microtiming alignment. The key feature is resonance — two people get into a rhythm and ideas appear between them, not inside either one alone.[95] Best for multiperspective problems, complex conceptual spaces, design, choreography, improv, invention, and situations that need live state-shifting rather than solitary analysis. Enter it with a partner you trust intellectually and emotionally. Meet while standing or walking, or move lightly. Use eye contact or parallel posture. Begin with something emotionally charged or curiosity-heavy.

See also the supplemental materials for more information on the engines, modes, and associated creativity techniques and methods.

Creativity Methods and Techniques

There are countless creativity techniques, many of which can be understood as specializations of particular ideation modes — for example, *Stimulus Safaris* as a form of Serendipitous Collision or *Rubber Ducking* as a form of Externalization. A collection of such techniques is in the supplemental materials.

If ideation is a bottleneck, modes and techniques can be used to jump-start the process. They still require knowledge, skill, and usable information about the issue.

Because people, working styles, circumstances, and domains differ, there is no single best method. The criterion is not how «*creative*⌣» or exciting a method feels, but

whether it generates relevant ideas. Enjoyment matters, but it is not enough.[96]

AI can support ideation by expanding options, externalizing half-formed thoughts, and helping the user explore a problem space. But it also risks changing the creator's role from maker to selector or manager. Especially early in the creative process it can massively bias what comes after it. See Tools on page 87.

In general, ideation works best when multiple modes are part of ordinary life and ideas are generated continuously, rather than being invoked only in a pinch.

Common Failure Modes of Ideation

Common ideation failures are working on the wrong problem, converging too quickly, treating ideas as special, evaluating too little, and ignoring domain and field affordances.

Working on the Wrong Problem

In creative projects, there is a strong temptation to work on the parts that are easiest to solve, because they create quick visible progress and are often more fun. This temptation grows when the hard parts turn out to be harder than expected. The result is that time, effort, and resources accumulate before it is even known whether the project can succeed.

For example, someone wants to write a book and designs the perfect cover before writing the manuscript. Or students iterate endlessly on the layout of an app without knowing whether they can build its functionality. This does not mean such work is always useless.[97] It means it must remain secondary until the real bottlenecks are addressed.

Astro Teller's metaphor of «**monkeys and pedestals**»[98] captures this well. If the goal is to train a monkey to juggle

flaming torches while standing on a pedestal in a public park, one can either train the monkey or build the pedestal. Many people build the pedestal first because it is easier. But the pedestal is worthless unless the monkey can actually be trained. So the monkey problem has to come first. If it proves impossible,[99] the showstopper is discovered early, before major time, money, and identity have been invested.

So when using focused ideation to flesh out projects, attack the hard parts first — the monkey problems. Easy parts can be captured as they arise. The rest is usually «*only*» a matter of craft.

Converging Too Quickly on a Suboptimal Solution

A common failure mode when generating ideas is **premature convergence**. One idea dominates too early, for example because it initially genuinely seems like the best idea. Given that strong bias in its favor, exploration of the design space shuts down. The initial idea is improved until it reaches its best form. However, that might only be a local maximum. Other ideas, which were no longer explored, might have led to much better solutions if they had been elaborated further (see Figure 8).[100]

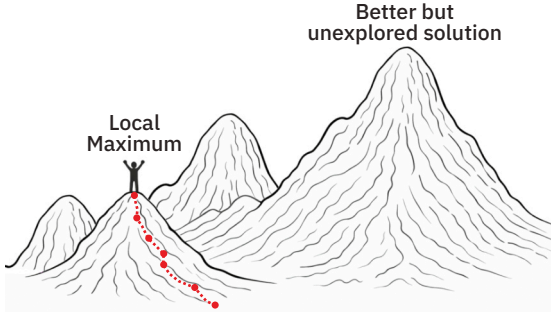

Figure 8: Premature convergence on a local maximum in the design space. A currently best-looking idea can stop further exploration even though a much better solution may still exist elsewhere in the design space. The underlying design-space concept is discussed by Greenberg, Carpendale, Marquardt, and Buxton (2012).

The path to these better ideas often runs through bad or even crazy ones. However, you cannot deliberately generate bad or crazy ideas — that would not work.[101] The point is to delay judgment for a while, to entertain and follow ideas without endorsing them,[102] and to use bad or unethical ones as the basis for better ideas. In some cases, they are even needed first — for example, in order to devise defenses against them (e.g., *adversarial mindset*, *red teaming*). In other cases, being comfortable with thinking or voicing bad or crazy ideas opens up remote regions of the design space.

Thus, multiple ideas should be explored in parallel to see where they lead, rather than committing too early to a single «*obvious*» one. This is the principle of «*First get the‿ right idea, then get the‿ idea right*».[103]

Seeing Ideas as Special

In the cyclic model, ideas are elaborated, reduced, recombined, and replaced. Bad ideas can become the basis of better ones. Crazy ideas can signal that censorship has not yet taken over.

But that also means that most ideas will not survive into the final work. That is normal ideation, not a failure.

For that reason, ideation has to become cheap, frequent, and ordinary. Once ideas are generated as part of ordinary life — during idle phases, work, or structured exploration — they stop feeling precious. That makes it easier both to generate more of them and to discard them when needed.

Ideas matter because they enable the project — they are usually means, not ends.

Insufficient or Postponed Evaluation

Evaluation belongs to the ideation cycle because coherence is easy to mistake for truth. An idea can make sense internally and still fail in reality.

That is why external evaluation is needed, ideally early (see Project Evaluation on page 209). Some avoid evaluation or do it haphazardly, because they fear the idea may fail. That fear is understandable, especially when it feels like the only idea they have. But discovering failure early is still better than discovering it after large investments of time and effort.

Ideas can be replaced — wasted resources cannot.

Ignoring the Domain and Field Affordances

Creativity happens at the intersection of individual, domain, and field.[104] Ideation modes therefore have to fit all three. A mismatch with the individual is usually noticed quickly. A mismatch with the domain or field often takes longer and creates unnecessary friction.

Every **domain** has structural affordances that shape how ideas can form, what counts as progress, and which modes work naturally. Using the difference between scientific research and improv again (from page 16), they differ, for example, in temporal flexibility (time before you must act), representational persistence (can you draft, revise, externalize), constraint level (rules and boundaries you must respect), and emotional or social density (under emotional pressure, alone or with others). In science, Internal Simulation, Externalization, and Constraint-Driven Exploration fit well — in improv, those modes would tank the performance. There, Emotional-Motivational Ignition, Kinesthetic-Embodied Ideation, and Interpersonal Synchrony Ideation are often much better suited — which would look insane in science.

Fields determine what is recognized, selected, legitimized, and remembered as creative. Some fields reward novelty and risk. Others reward stability, usually for very good reasons (e.g., compare comedy vs. bridge engineering). In some domains, standards are largely set by the physical world. In others, aesthetics, taste, and social judgment matter more.[105]

In any case, ideas eventually have to be translated into forms the field can recognize. A scientist may discover like a poet — as with Kekulé's snake dream — but must argue like a lawyer in publication. A comedian may arrive at material through internal simulation, but if the result lacks emotional immediacy, the performance will fail.

Mode mismatch can even contribute to imposter syndrome, when a mode feels natural to the person but alien to the domain or field.

The supplemental materials address these fit problems in more detail.

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

Although creativity discourse usually focuses on generating ideas, ideation is rarely the true bottleneck in realizing projects. If the work keeps moving — through small insights, usable material, and increasing clarity — ideation is usually sufficient. Some ideation blocks also come less from a lack of ideas than from fear of feedback, doubt, or resistance to exposure (see Project Release on page 231).

Still, ideation can underflow or overflow (see Table 11).

Common underflows are droughts and misalignments — too little new input or variation, or ideas that are not connected to the actual project. Where the underlying problem is solvable, such underflows can usually be improved through more knowledge, more unassigned attention, or better-matched engines and modes (Creative Engines on page 99). Stale ideation often needs more discovery, chaotic ideation often needs more structure, and overabstract ideation may need stronger re-anchoring in material or action.

Overflow occurs when novelty floods the system without producing progress — especially when low-quality ideas overwhelm both capturing and collecting. Then noise begins to

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Knowledge for Ideas	lack of domain knowledge and embodied skill leads to ideas that seem coherent but do not work	sufficient knowledge to understand the requirements and constraints, without being discouraged by them	expert status leads to seeing what cannot be done instead of finding out how it might be done
Unassigned Attention	attention is constantly pre-allocated, so there is no incubation and no time for more structured approaches	establishing periods without external distractions, and using creativity methods to work deliberately on project ideas	blocking too much time for ideation at the cost of craftsmanship
Protection from Overcontrol	no idle cycles, insufficient understanding of the problem, seeing it as miraculous and not creating the conditions for it	making idle cycles a normal part of the day and not expecting anything from them	trying to force ideation, especially inspiration and insight, and thereby preventing it
Ideation Types	using the wrong type for the project stage and generating unusable or confusing ideas (e.g., drift when the project needs to be finalized)	switching to the required type of ideation depending on what is needed (e.g., from finding a new project idea to solving a bug)	still generating types of ideas that no longer advance the project
Creative Engines, Modes, and Methods	using them in an ad hoc manner	determining which engines, modes, and methods fit the stage of the project, the individual, and the domain or field	overfocusing on particular engines, modes, or methods; continuing to generate when the project needs to be finalized
Common Failure Modes of Ideation	wrong problem: pedestals before monkey problems; insufficient evaluation; ignoring domain and field affordances	solving the monkey problems first	premature convergence on a suboptimal idea; clinging to an idea because it seems precious

Table 11: Idea Generation — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow.

crowd out the project. In such cases, stronger quality constraints are needed. Low-effort capture can preserve surplus ideas for later, as long as capturing itself does not begin to compete with the core work.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter7

Where it fits into your current creative process:

1. Update your Creative System Map. Where do ideas actually arise in your life — in contexts, triggers, or situations, not in ideals? For example, while working, away from work (e.g., walking, commuting), during consumption (e.g., reading, listening, conversations), or unpredictably.
2. What typically happens next? Do nothing, note it mentally, write it somewhere, lose it, and so on.
3. Mark whether it constrains output, i.e., is a potential candidate for an Integration Worksheet trial.

Chapter 8: Capturing Ideas

> «Write down the thoughts of the moment.
> Those that come unsought for
> are commonly the most valuable.»
>
> *Francis Bacon*

Generated ideas are fleeting and fragile — unless they are externalized quickly, they degrade, mutate, or vanish. That is simply a consequence of limited working memory and attention. Ideas are especially vulnerable when the context changes — e.g., entering another room, when we are interrupted, or when further ideas arise. Even later reconstruction often produces only plausible but inferior versions — if the moment is remembered at all.[106]

For this reason, many people capture ideas, e.g., a journal next to the bed, a notes app for quick one-handed notes while walking, an idea file on the computer that opens quickly, a sketchpad within easy reach, or voice memos on a smartwatch or smartphone.

Your capture system may be memory-based or externalized, intentional or accidental, but it determines how many of these ideas remain available for creative work.

Capturing is the intake valve of the creative system.

While some larger ideas can be remembered — e.g., that one project you always wanted to do — many supporting ideas are easily forgotten. Once captured, however, they can be collected (see page 127), allowing even large creative projects to gain enough mass to be realized. You also stop being at the mercy of an unreliable memory.

Because capturing is itself a form of **Externalization**, it can generate further ideas (see page 101). As a **Structure** mode, it also imposes order on raw material. It frees resources that would otherwise be needed just to hold the idea in mind,

making it easier to generate further ideas, flesh them out, revisit older ones, or take a different branch. Even bad or currently unviable ideas can become the basis for better ones. Captured ideas can always be evaluated and discarded later. Forgotten ideas that were never captured usually cannot be recovered.

If you have never externalized your ideas systematically, the effect is easy to test by doing it for a month. A comparison with what you had before might reveal a striking difference.

Fast, Easy, Available, and Usable Later

A capture method only works if it satisfies four requirements at once — it must be **immediate**, **effortless** enough to use in the moment, **available** in the moment, and **clear** enough to remain usable later.

Optimizing one at the expense of the others usually breaks the system.

Immediate Capture

The chance to capture an idea declines quickly. Thus, the capture method must be immediately available (low latency), ideally within less than five seconds. The main exceptions are specific **Ideation Modes**, e.g., Internal Simulation or Emotional-Motivational Ignition, where early externalization may interrupt the mode prematurely.

In any case, ideas must be captured **before the context changes**. These context changes are often underestimated. Returning from the toilet to the desk and seeing new e-mails can be enough to wipe an idea away. Driving home, entering the house, and being greeted by wife and children can do the same.

So capture them before crossing a threshold.

Effortless Capture

Ideas often arise when motivation is low, e.g., during relaxation or while falling asleep, time is short, e.g., at work, or options are limited, e.g., on the move. Thus, the capture method must be as effortless as possible in the given context.

For example, a notepad with a pen on the desk is almost effortless and immediately available. You just pick up the pen and write. If you had to get a journal out of your bag in another room, it would already be more effort and less immediate. If you had to get your laptop from that bag and sketch with it, the effort would be even higher and require extra decisions, e.g., which app, how to name the file, etc.

Crucially, capture methods **should never rely on motivation**. Motivation varies like a wave over time (see Figure 9). You never know how high it will be when an idea strikes, and chances are it will be low — especially for discovery-engine ideas. Motivation is also distorted by the assumed value of the idea, which can easily be misjudged, e.g., being very tired and deciding «*the idea is not that important*». Ease of capture should therefore compensate for low motivation.[107]

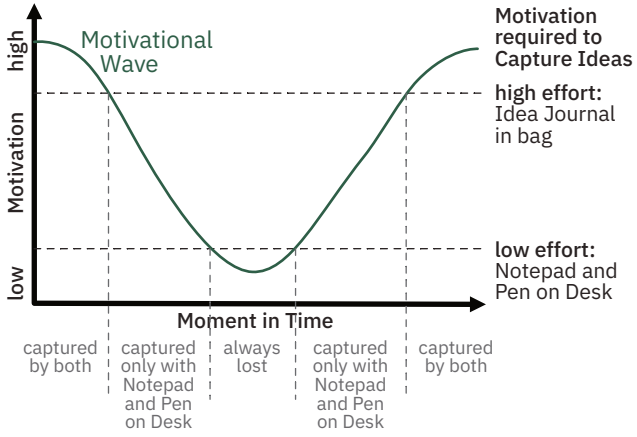

Figure 9: Motivational Wave and Capturing Effort.

Even a low-effort tool will still miss some ideas, e.g., when dead tired, but it will catch many ideas during low motivational waves that a high-effort tool would miss. Relying on effortful capture methods means depending on high motivation — and thus losing many ideas due to «*too much effort*», «*not in the mood*», or «*too tired*».

Effort includes both physical and mental demands.

The **physical demand** is shaped, among other things, by how much movement is required (e.g., doing audio notes with a smartwatch on the wrist while half-asleep vs. using a smartphone that is on the nightstand), and by whether the tool is physically usable at all (e.g., a smartphone can be used one-handed while walking with an umbrella or coffee in the other hand — notepad and pen usually require two hands).

The **mental demand** is shaped by the number of decisions required (e.g., a digital file that needs to be named and suggests formatting vs. a paper notepad where you just write), and by the felt cost of capture (objective and subjective; e.g., a pristine expensive notebook can create reluctance to record low-quality ideas, whereas a cheap notepad invites use).

Because even deciding whether to capture an idea, or which tool to use, creates cognitive load, the default should be to **always capture** ideas in a **default tool**. The only criterion is that the idea feels crisp enough to preserve, whether it is a simple thought, an inspiration, an insight, an early unformed idea, or an apparently bad one. Evaluation can happen later, and if too much noise is captured, the filter can always be tightened.

Availability

Availability includes it being **physically present** where ideas occur (e.g., water-resistant paper works in the shower — digital devices usually do not), being **socially acceptable** in that context so it can actually be used (e.g., notepad and pen at a

classical concert — smartphone less so), being **organizationally compatible** by not interfering too much with the ongoing activity and allowing easy return to it (e.g., while working at the PC, an idea text file can be opened without much interruption — switching to a paper journal less so), and being usable **without risk** (e.g., voice notes can work while driving — writing notes does not).

Capture That Is Understandable Later

To be useful, future-you must be able to understand what was captured. That sounds trivial, but many ideas are lost because handwriting is unreadable, audio is unclear, or context was not preserved. In some cases, the idea never really enters the system because the situation that made it meaningful is gone or the connection to a project is missing (see Preserving the Essence of the Ideas on page 116).

Thus, capture does not have to look good, that would also slow it down too much — but it does have to remain understandable. The simplest way to ensure this is to check and correct the record shortly after capture and move it into the collection quickly (see page 119).

Trade-Offs

These requirements pull against each other. A method can be extremely fast but too cryptic to be useful later, or very complete but too effortful to use when the idea actually appears. The aim is not perfection on one dimension, but a workable balance across all four.

At its best, capturing the idea immediately is easier and faster than deciding whether to do so or not.

Once capturing is structured this way, it becomes second nature, much like Generating Ideas (see pages 93ff). Ideas are almost always caught, and even bad ideas can become the basis for better ones.

Preserving the Essence of the Ideas

Ideas take different forms — sparks, insight flashes, structural ideas, emotions, or emotional insights — and this determines what has to be captured if they are to remain useful later. What matters is that the idea's essential aspects are preserved in a form that remains usable.

Ephemeral Content (Sparks, Shower Thoughts)

These are often isolated ideas, and without much reference they dissolve quickly. They therefore have to be captured immediately. If they arose from associative drift, capturing them while staying in the moment preserves the drift. Evaluating, reflecting, or trying to force further ideas kills it.

This content can take the form of:

- **Micro-Associations:** Tiny, fragile links the mind forms spontaneously, e.g., «*goals as river deltas*».
- **Subtle Observations:** Things that do not feel important yet, but are seeds of larger insights, e.g., «*customers do x after y*».
- **Sensory Impressions:** Hard to notice unless one listens inward, e.g., «*steam is orange⌣ in morning sun*».
- **Idea Echoes:** Related material that appears after the first capture and can lead to real depth if caught, not forced.

Insight Flashes

These are sudden recognitions of a pattern, often not yet fully formed. They are highly fragile because several threads in the mind connect only briefly before coherence starts to decay. Here both the **insight** and the **structure it rests on** matter.

If the architecture behind it — connections, tensions, ordering of implications, or emotional salience — is not captured as well, the insight often loses force later.

Structural Ideas (Forms)

Because their internal relations are more stable, these ideas usually last longer, but they still dissolve if not externalized.

They can take forms such as:

- **Shapes of Ideas:** For example, «*this could be⌣ a trilogy*».
- **Problem Formulations:** Often representational shifts, e.g., «*Why X and not Y?*» — they need quick capture because they easily mutate.
- **Constraints:** For example, design principles such as «*the⌣ UI needs agency, not simplicity*».
- **Contradictions:** Pressure points requiring a third solution, not errors per se, e.g., «*privacy and connection*».
- **Creative Questions:** Starting points for later ideation — the question matters more than any immediate answer.
- **Partial Structures:** Fragments, loose clusters, or bits that do not yet belong anywhere, e.g., a few lines of dialogue.

Emotions

Emotional content comes with a felt quality — e.g., impressions such as mood, texture, emotional temperature, sensory fragments, symbolic resonance, bodily sensation, meaning, or tone.

The aim is to preserve the **emotional richness**, **atmosphere**, **texture**, or **emotional logic** so it can later be used in a work.

For example, «*Sunset. Orange⌣ bleeding into violet. Cool air on eyelids. Distant dog bark. Sea-salt smell. Slow warmth in chest.*». Voice memos are useful here because they preserve the emotional timbre of the voice.

The risk is flattening. Capture can easily reduce the experience to a tidy narrative, facts, or interpretation, all of which feel cold (e.g., «*The⌣ sunset was beautiful. Orange⌣ sky. Felt*

peaceful.»). Narrative drift makes the memory more coherent but less raw, and affective decay weakens intensity unless it is stored in a more multimodal form.

Emotional Insights

These are emotions that matter primarily for self-understanding. To remain useful, the important thing is not just the insight itself, but why it mattered: What it felt like, why it was compelling, what it pointed to, and what action tendency it contained. This translates emotional realization into something more stable, actionable, and re-triggerable.

Capturing it this way preserves the part that would otherwise be rewritten by the calmer, more controlled self. Note that insights do not require acting on them.

These insights can take forms such as:

- **Strong Emotional States** that are highly fleeting — once the state ends, meaning fades, defensive rationalization returns, and urgency is lost.
- **Motivation Traces** that require capturing why the idea mattered, what it made you feel, and what felt alive.
- **Shadow Ideas** — wild, chaotic, or «*dirty*» ideas that can feel exposing, but often carry strong creative potential and require private capture and the understanding that idea ≠ identity or agreement.

Useful forms to make insights actionable include:

- **procedural encodings:** If–then rules, e.g., «*If I get stressed, then I pause⌣ and ask myself X*».
- **environmental cue placements:** For example, post-its or objects as reminders.
- **behavioral rehearsals:** Imagining oneself doing it.
- **value alignments:** Linking the insight to identity or goals.

Connection to Idea Collection

Capturing ideas is different from collecting ideas. At the moment of capture, ideas are often still forming and not yet clear enough to place inside a structured collection. Trying to do that immediately raises questions such as «*What is this really about?*» or «*Where does it belong?*», and those questions clog ideation.

Capture therefore works best outside the collection and without concern for later placement.

However, for the ideas to remain useful, they must eventually feed future projects. That means captured ideas have to make their way into the idea collection (Collecting Ideas, see pages 127ff), so transfer should be as quick and easy as possible, e.g., through a Collection Inbox (see page 135). This keeps ideas understandable and accessible later, prevents demotivating backlog — or worse, a chaotic drawer full of unreadable notes. It also brings them into the backup cycle of the collection if the capture tool is damaged, lost, or stolen. It usually also improves privacy, because the collection is better secured than the temporary capture tool.

This transition becomes a problem when a capture tool is excellent for catching ideas quickly but poor for revisiting them later. For example, scribbled paper notes that are hard to read, or audio notes that are easy to record in bed or while driving, but aversive to replay later.

Because capture is only a means to an end, that transition problem either has to be fixed[108] or the method has to be changed.

Capturing Tools

Because capturing is only temporary storage until ideas enter the collection, capture tools should be evaluated by how well they satisfy the system requirements for capturing. They are a net to catch ideas, not an aquarium to keep them in.

While the supplemental materials go into more detail, the following tools can provide some inspiration if the current method needs improvement.

Possible tools include:

- **pen and paper:** A good but not expensive pen — quickly usable,[109] ideally one that writes against gravity when lying in bed, weatherproof paper for the shower, otherwise cheap paper.
- **stationary writing surfaces:** For example, whiteboards, blackboards, static-cling writing sheets.
- **smartphones:** For example, inbox button on lock screen, voice memo shortcut — beware notifications that distract.
- **tablets:** For example, sketching with the right app, copy-paste is useful for exploring visual deviations.
- **smartwatches:** Especially useful for voice memos.
- **PCs/laptops:** For example, shortcut to a text file or task manager input, headset/camera for audio or video capture, complex software is usually better for prototyping than for capture.

As discussed in the Tools chapter (see page 87), the right tool is not a question of looks, price, or features, but of pure usability for you. Some methods carry a certain aura — branded notebooks, particular notebook practices, elegant apps — but the real criterion is whether the tool works for you. A tool should never be more valuable than your worst ideas. Small behavioral trials will show the effect and value of

different capture methods for you more truthfully than other people's opinions.

Both digital devices (especially one-handed smartphone use and voice memos) and paper (especially immediate availability, lack of distraction, and support for both writing and sketching) have strengths and weaknesses. This is not a camp or identity issue. Use what best satisfies the principles of capture in that situation.

Beyond personal fit, the best tool depends strongly on contexts, which come with different constraints, options, and risks (see Table 12). This makes infrastructure preparation especially powerful. Often it is only a matter of ensuring that the right tool is already available where ideas tend to occur, and only a few prohibit capture completely (e.g., while riding a motorcycle). At home, for example, notepads and pens can

Context	Main constraint	Good options	Main risks
Bed	low light, half asleep, low motivation	smartwatch voice memo, light-pen + pad by bed or reading light	phone distraction leading to poorer sleep, delay to morning and forgetting
Shower / Bathtub	wet hands, steam, context breaks fast	waterproof notepad or nearby paper outside spray area	delaying until after shower and losing the idea at the context break
Walking	movement, sometimes only one hand free	smartphone, voice note, small notepad	stopping the flow with fiddly tools
Car	safety critical, hands occupied	voice memo only	divided attention causing more damage than missed ideas
Work	social visibility, interruption	PC, notepad, sticky notes, discreet phone capture if allowed	self-censorship, context switching

Table 12: Examples of Capturing Options depending on Context

be placed near the bed, in the shower, near the toilet, in the living room, and in the kitchen.

Done well, the question «*Where do I capture it?*» never arises. Asking it would already require decisions and interfere with holding the idea. The default method for that context is simply present and used without thinking.

A backup method is still useful in case the primary one fails (e.g., no pages left, empty pen, low battery, device update). A pen often covers many situations because paper is easy to find.

Common Failure Modes of Capturing

There are four common failure modes in capturing ideas — having no way to capture, social barriers, missed ideas, and trying to capture everything.

Having No Way to Capture

Sometimes the default method is simply not available. Even then, there are usually ways to capture ideas, though some improvisation may be needed. This often means seeing what objects can be used for, not what they were made for. Songwriters have written on toilet paper, businessmen have used napkins during lunch meetings, and prisoners have improvised pens.[110]

Still, preparation is better — especially with an «*always with you*» fallback option. A working capture system should let you relax and have ideas, because you trust that they will not be wasted.

Social Barriers

Some people hesitate to capture ideas in public, or even in private when the content feels dark or weird. Others think it looks unprofessional to write things down. But social barriers

are usually self-imposed. Ideas are not judgments about identity, nor signs of agreement, and needing to write things down is normal if you have a lot of ideas.

If social barriers are an issue for you, it helps to focus on capture itself. That leaves less attention available for monitoring other people. Awkwardness usually draws more attention than the act of writing. If possible, excuse yourself briefly or use a smartphone, since its use is rarely questioned. Longer writing also makes it less likely others assume it is about them.

And beyond that — just do it. These are ideas, the possible building blocks of major creative work. Other people's impressions matter less than that.

Missed Ideas

Even with a good capture system, some ideas will be lost. Distraction, interruption, or a temporary drop in motivation are enough. If that happens, the useful thing is that you still noticed the miss. That allows you to examine why it happened and reduce the chance of repetition.

Sometimes ideas can even be recovered — by retracing steps, reducing anxiety, and returning to similar conditions later. The idea came from somewhere, and the relevant conditions may occur again.

Still, do not overreact to missed ideas. Ideas matter, but not every idea can be caught. Being obsessed with capturing everything is worse than losing the occasional idea.

Trying to Capture Everything

Although evaluation should come later, the absence of any filter can leave one drowning in thousands of tiny ideas. As with generating too many ideas, this leaves too little time to realize any of them. The collection becomes flooded as well.

If that happens, the signal-to-noise ratio has to be improved. It may hurt not to capture every potentially good idea, but that is less costly than never realizing any idea at all.

Looking for patterns in the captured material can help here: Which kinds of ideas are being captured, which ones later showed promise, and what early markers predict that promise. It can also help simply to notice which ideas actually resonate. Limiting capture to specific projects — e.g., core or central ones — can help as well (see Creative Energy on page 163).

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

The main problem in capturing is usually underflow, especially leakage. Ideas are lost because capture is not available immediately, too effortful, or not usable later (see Table 13).

Typical signs are remembering *having had* an idea without remembering what it was, noticing that ideas disappear when reaching the workplace, mood-dependent capture, or notes that later make no sense and never enter the collection.

If that is the case, the requirements in this chapter and small trials of different methods should help address it — see also the supplemental materials.

Where overflow is the problem, constraints are needed. Limiting capture options or adding a brief evaluation before capture can create enough friction. Unlike increasing latency or effort, this still preserves the ability to catch worthwhile ideas.

In any case, start with what you currently have, make one change, and watch what happens both to the captured ideas and to the projects that get realized. The aim is to identify and adjust the mechanisms through which ideas already do, or do not, enter the creative system — not to build a new «*capture⤻habit*».

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Fast, Easy, Available, and Usable Later	leakage due to high latency or effort, method unavailable, undecipherable notes	available without thinking, capture is a normal part of the day	capturing too much noise or «*everything*»
Preserving the Essence	preserving only the what, but not the how or why; ideas become dead, abstract, cold	capturing the information needed to preserve the essence for future projects	going beyond capture and developing the idea prematurely (e.g., writing scenes instead of preserving it)
Connection to Idea Collection	transfer from capture to collection stalls, e.g., due to media breaks, effortful reading, or aversive listening	transfer is part of the normal workflow with a defined collection point (e.g., Collection Inbox)	captured ideas enter the collection without elaboration or quality control
Capturing Tools	tools not available or not suited to the context (e.g., ideas while driving but only a notepad in the car instead of voice recording)	infrastructure provides default tools with a fallback option	too many options require decisions and interfere with capture
Common Failure Modes of Capturing Ideas	no way to capture, not capturing due to social concerns	using what is available, focusing on capture, not overreacting to missed ideas, balanced capture	ruminating about missed ideas, trying to capture everything

Table 13: Capturing Ideas — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter8

Where it fits into your current creative process:

1. Update your Creative System Map.

2. Describe what actually happens today: How do ideas enter material form right now? List actual tools, places, or failure points. Which capture points are trusted, and which are avoided? Do not improve anything yet. You are identifying the capture mechanism already shaping your work.
3. Mark whether it constrains output, i.e., is a potential candidate for an Integration Worksheet trial.

Chapter 9: Collecting Ideas

> «If it ain't complete and you don't trust it, you won't use it.»
>
> *David Allen*

Generated and captured ideas end up somewhere. Some people try to remember them, or leave them in the capture tool, e.g., pages in an idea journal or notes app. Others have a drawer full of paper scraps, a collection of files and folders, specialized software, or some other dedicated system. The question is not whether you have a collection, but how well it supports the realization of creative projects.

A working collection that stores ideas in a usable, structured fashion is a **living system** — not a graveyard.

It ensures that ideas remain available when needed. Collected ideas also act as crystallization grains around which related ideas accumulate. Quantity improves — in the form of more ideas and information. Quality improves — in the form of structural changes, elaboration, and iterative idea cycles. Ideas and projects grow and connect until they reach «*critical mass*»[111] and can be realized as creative projects. This makes even large and complex projects possible.

An idea collection does not need to be complicated or heavily designed in advance. On the contrary, people can get lost easily in creating collections (see Collecting Becomes the Focus on page 139). In its minimalist form, a collection is simply a storage of ideas that lets you find material quickly and easily — for example, an artist collecting stimulating material in a folder. Depending on the domain, collections can become more complex, e.g., for scientists who need accurate citation. But they remain in the service of enabling creative projects.

There are functional differences between capturing as temporary intake, collecting as a long-term working repository, project workspaces or production tools where realization happens, and archives or asset stores where bulky or finished material lives.

Before commitment to realize a specific project (see Creative Commitment on page 175), ideas and possible projects should grow in the collection. After commitment, production tools may take over.

For example, you might have a project idea for a book. If you move into writing tools too early and start developing content there, new ideas are stored outside the collection. If you later decide to realize a different project, those ideas are effectively lost to other work. Worse, you become dependent on another application that may not remain usable in the future.

Content of the Collection

Collections need to handle ideas, and often project pages and connections between entries.

- **Idea Pages:** Short notes, usually with references to similar or opposing ideas. Collecting ideas does not mean the entries are tidy or complete. Entries can be fragments, questions, emotional impressions, problem formulations, associative-drift debris, structural ideas, contradictions, constraints, partial scenes, half-solutions, insight clusters, breakthroughs, methods discovered on the fly, and much more. The collection simply has to make that material accessible.
- **Project Pages:** More structured entries, often extending over multiple pages. For example, a dissertation project can include pages on todos, thesis outline, literature to get, reminders, issues to discuss with the advisor, things to

remember for the defense, outlines for papers to publish, notes on technology used, future research ideas, grant ideas, etc.

- **Connections:** Whether it is a handwritten «*see ⌣ card xyz*» or a digital link, meaningful connections make the collection more manageable. For Network and Hybrid types (see Collection Types on page 130), they are essential. There is no need to force them, however. Some connections are obvious, others become visible only after noticing repeated movement between two entries. Occasional review of the collection helps to remind you of available material and reveals connections.

Other content relevant to creative work can also be stored in the collection, as long as it directly supports ideas and projects:

- **Cold Storage:** Ideas or possible projects that are distracting. For example, ideas that go nowhere but drain attention and energy, or zombie projects you had to actively kill. Stored in a separate, less salient part of the collection, e.g., not listed in overviews in a digital collection, they are no longer active and removed from ideation. The material is not deleted as it might still inspire future work or might get reactivated when things change, but its removal from the live system restores clarity and flow.
- **Sanctuary:** Ideas or possible projects that are serious and valuable, but do not fit with the current creative direction. They are stored separately to prevent them from interfering with daily practice (see Creative Finitude and Limits on page 154).
- **Sources:** Material that is not your own work, but is useful as foundation or inspiration. This can include extracts from articles or books, texts, images, excellent or terrible solutions, newspaper clippings, poems, music tracks, and much more. These entries should clearly indicate that the

material is not yours and ideally include the actual source information. Even if you think you could never confuse it with your own work, that can change as your skills and interests evolve. An «*I could never do something like this.*» can quickly turn to «*Did I do that or did someone else come up with it?*»

- **Skills and Topics Information:** Notes on domains you are interested in, ideally with clear structure. For example, learning notes on a programming language, including sources if needed for citation.
- **Someday List:** Everything that cannot be realized now, but should not be forgotten. A «*Someday List*» can relieve pressure to do the other project immediately (see also Creative Energy on page 163).
- **Archive of Realized Projects:** Having the final version of completed projects easily available can be motivating and useful for sharing. To keep the collection lean, creation material and earlier versions are usually better kept in a separate archive or asset store.

Other content may work as well — for example personal information, diary entries, or contact information. It can even encourage more frequent interaction with the collection. But it can also lead to the failure mode of Using the Collection for Everything (see page 140).

Collection Types

Depending on how a collection is structured, it directs attention and idea growth differently (see Figure 10). Different centers of gravity produce different growth patterns:

- **Minimalist (emergent):** A simple collection, e.g., files and folders with light annotation. Regular reviews prevent mutation into an idea drawer and regular pruning reduces noise. It has no center of gravity, so its growth pattern is

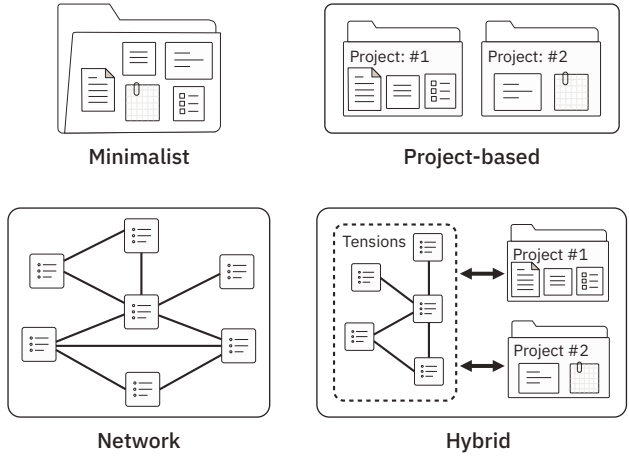

Figure 10: Collection Types.

emergent and undirected — patterns emerge through recurrence and review. They work best for people who are just starting to collect ideas and those who need a light repository, e.g., painters collecting inspirations and sketches.

- **Project (objects):** Projects organize the collection, e.g., folders by domain and project pages with ideas for these projects. Optional files for unassigned ideas, e.g., collection pages for various ideas that could turn into projects. Projects are the center of gravity — the sustained engagement with a live problem inside a project leads to their growth by accumulating ideas. They work best for artifact creators, narrative thinkers, and builders who think in projects, e.g., books or papers.
- **Network (ideas):** Idea-focused collections with one idea per note, high granularity, and dense linking. Projects are temporary constellations. Luhmann's «*Zettelkasten*» is an example of this type of collection. Growth occurs in its network-density, the links between entries, which also

shapes the structure through its interconnections. They work best for people who think in connected ideas, especially abstract or conceptual work built over decades, e.g., theory, cross-domain synthesis, and reuse of ideas.

- **Hybrid (tensions):** Combines network-based and project-based structure. Concept areas for recurring structural nodes or tensions, e.g., repeated themes or questions, with project pages as case studies that explore and express these tensions iteratively. Growth occurs in tensions, which persist across projects and ensure continuity, and in projects, which provide momentum and a finishing bias. Both tensions and projects stimulate each other. They work best for people who think in projects but have recurring themes that outlive individual projects, e.g., writers, essayists, cross-domain thinkers, or structurally minded artifact producers.

The question is not which type of collection a person wants, but which one works best for their creative work. More organization is not always better — many excellent creators operate with minimal structure. The test is whether the system produces finished, usable output.

Some collection types are intellectually seductive. The network type («*Zettelkasten*»), for example, promises structural mastery, systemic coherence, and future-proof ideas. And that can be powerful for theories, frameworks, models, and structural observations. Someone doing conceptual work may find the other collections too concrete, like trying to cage a swarm of birds.

However, someone who thinks in projects may lose their center of gravity in a network system — ideas become stars in the distance and nothing pulls them anywhere. Someone who only needs a light collection will often be distracted by anything much more elaborate than a minimalist one. For hybrid thinkers, the interplay between project structure and

networks is often what makes the system work — either one alone may be insufficient.

Thus, the structure of the collection has to support creativity by directing incoming ideas to the right place to grow — emergent, project-based, connected, or hybrid.

Working Functionality

The collection must both support immediate and long-term use.

Growth, Change, and Retrieval

A good collection supports the deliberate creation of things that are new and useful. That function comes first. The collection is not itself a creative project, though treating it as one is a common failure mode (see Collecting Becomes the Focus on page 139).

This means the collection must:

- **Allow frictionless growth:** The structure should support rather than strangle the collection. It should be easy to add information in the right place (e.g., creating pages, using templates), change it (e.g., editing, renaming), restructure it (e.g., associating ideas with a specific project), and make connections between ideas or projects (cross-references, links). Ideally, entries stimulate further ideas.
- **Enable effortless retrieval:** Navigating to information or finding it through search should be at least as easy as entering it. Multiple entry points should exist, e.g., tables of contents, index pages, bookmarks, searches, graph views, or tags. If entering is easy but retrieval is not, the Collection Becomes an Idea Dump (see page 139).
- **Be flexible regarding content:** Relevant information can take the form of text, images, audio, video, and more. These should be handled with low organizational over-

head. For example, the system should deal with file naming collisions or storage location.[112] If physical objects are included, referencing them should also be easy.

- **Be adaptable:** Some adaptability is usually needed to make the system fit personal requirements. For digital collections, this might include themes, plugins, or colors. For analog collections, color, post-its, and other simple conventions can help.
- **Enable serendipity:** The collection should have enough presence to invite browsing and remind you of ideas and projects. This makes serendipitous connections more likely.

Long-Term Usability

A creative project may not be worked on for years, and its realization may also take years. Unlike capture, the collection therefore has to support long-term use.

- **Trust:** If a collection is not trustworthy — in the sense that it remains available and continues to function reliably — then everything invested in it is at risk. The result is that it will not really be used. That trust, however, has to be justified in practice, in actual use.
- **Long-term ease of use:** Friction may come from the work itself or from your standards, but it should not come from the tool. The collection must remain easy to use even as it grows. Slow loading, sluggish search, or awkward navigation become serious problems in large collections. The attraction of a new solution can also hide problems that make long-term use aversive. Look and feel can matter as a secondary factor — liking the system makes regular use more likely.
- **Long-term availability:** Will the collection still be accessible and usable in ten or twenty years? This matters especially for digital systems. Who controls the data? Can it be

exported? If the software disappears and the format is proprietary, access may be lost.[113] This makes cloud-only systems, subscription dependencies, and data islands, which prevent export of data, significant risks. A digital solution that uses freely readable file formats is much safer, e.g., markdown files and ordinary media files stored in folders. With some software, bugs and crashes become more likely as the collection grows, so it is worth checking how users with large collections fare.

- **Backups (protection against loss):** Ideas are often not reproducible. User error, software error, hardware failure, loss, fire, or water damage can wipe out a collection. Backups therefore have to be easy and mostly automatic. This also applies to analog collections, which can at least be photographed or scanned occasionally. Good backup practice means saving early, often, externally (other physical locations), incrementally, and retaining older versions. Sync is not backup — a mistake syncs just as easily as correct content. In case of losing or forgetting it somewhere, visible return information increases the chance of recovery.[114] See also the supplemental materials.
- **Access control / encryption (protection against theft or abuse):** If the collection does not feel reasonably private, it becomes difficult to write openly and to avoid self-censorship. Encryption can help, though the usual risk is locking yourself out. Privacy is especially relevant with cloud-based systems, where companies may analyze the content of «*their*» cloud.

Collection Inbox

Captured ideas need to enter the collection quickly (see Connection to Idea Collection on page 119). Because both huge backlogs and constant individual entry are demotivating, a

Collection Inbox can function as a buffer. It reduces the friction of adding ideas to the collection.

Whatever the capture method — notepads, task manager apps, audio notes, text files on a computer — all captured information is funneled into **one specific location**. For an analog collection that might be a single physical box. For a digital collection it might be one text file and one folder for media, e.g., images, videos, and audio files. This preserves freedom at the point of capture because there is never any doubt where the material goes next.

The Collection Inbox then makes batch processing possible. Instead of spending small amounts of time almost every day on entry, you can set aside a regular block, e.g., once per week, and process the inbox in one go. Pre-sorting the material also helps, because you can then open a relevant page in the collection once and add all associated content at the same time.

In a digital collection, including the inbox in the backup process also protects ideas that have been captured but not yet fully entered. This includes ideas captured on paper and then photographed, or paper and audio notes that were transcribed manually, by OCR, or with speech-to-text software.

Starting a New Collection

If you have used your mind as an idea collection so far, or want to start a new one, the following points may help.

Tools for Collections

There are many options for collections, from simple files and folders to specialized software. Because tools change frequently — companies fold, products appear and disappear — an overview is in the supplemental materials.

In general, digital tools are more flexible, easier to change, and much easier to back up. Paper-based collections can still work, e.g., notebooks, ring binders, or index cards. Luhmann's Zettelkasten was on paper, after all.

What matters is what you can create with the tool. Avoid looking for the perfect collection method. That search never ends, because you change, your work changes, and tools change. It usually just delays actual creation (see also Tools on page 87).

Starting

If you start a new collection, it might be useful to begin **Minimalist** — a simple folder, a small set of categories, and a weekly ritual for moving captured ideas into the collection.

That is enough to begin, and as long as the content remains changeable, nothing important is foreclosed. Momentum beats architecture and behavioral feedback beats an elegant collection that works only in theory.

Some chaos at the beginning is normal. The collection has to grow before its structure becomes clear. Skim it from time to time and see which topics, projects, or idea clusters increase. Over time, the need for more specific structure becomes apparent.

You will learn what you need, which kinds of projects profit from which structure, and which tool fits best. For example, you might go from Minimalist to Project to Hybrid to Network, or from Network to Hybrid to Project. More abstract systems often become useful once ideas begin to outlive individual projects or themes recur across projects.

If you already use a collection or have a huge backlog of captured ideas, it is often better to begin by adding new ideas to the new collection. That way you start with hot material, and older ideas can be added gradually during droughts. But if you change collections, commit fully and migrate all rele-

vant material. Otherwise you end up with several half-used collections, and distributing ideas and projects across them makes realization much harder.

In general, having **one collection** is recommended. It allows **Serendipitous Collisions** across domains and provides a single source of truth when entries overlap. Separate collections may become necessary when privacy or legal constraints demand it (e.g., NDAs). In some cases, a separate project-specific collection may also make sense once a project is fully committed and enters intensive work, with little expectation that its insights will matter elsewhere.[115]

Growth of the Collection

At first, structure is light because there is not yet enough material to justify much organization. As ideas accumulate, recurring themes, projects, and problem types become visible. At that point, structure begins to emerge from the content rather than being imposed in advance.

Over time, a good collection becomes more than storage. It preserves ideas, makes them retrievable, shows patterns across entries, and allows older material to combine with newer material. This makes it easier to notice clusters, recurring themes, and possible projects. In that sense, a mature collection does not merely hold ideas — it supports recall, recombination, and development.

If the collection continues to grow well, it begins to reduce cognitive load. You no longer need to remember everything yourself, and returning to previous material can generate new connections, highlight gaps, and reveal which ideas are gaining enough weight to become projects.

The value of the collection is therefore how well it supports ongoing creative work.

Common Failure Modes of Collecting Ideas

Four common failure modes are that the collection becomes the focus, an idea dump, dead weight, or is used for everything.

Collecting Becomes the Focus

Collecting can be enjoyable in itself — many hobbies are built around it. It is easy to become enamored with collecting ideas and stop using them to realize projects.

Red flags are spending large amounts of time «*improving*» the collection, decorating it, endlessly adjusting formatting, and similar activities. A collection may look beautiful and should work efficiently, but its value lies in enabling creative projects.

That means ideas flow into it and are then used in projects that are actually realized. The collection itself is only a means to that end.

Collection Becomes an Idea Dump

Ideas have to be added quickly, but also in the right place and in a form that future-you can understand. And they must be retrievable. Otherwise the collection becomes an idea dump — an idea drawer full of unused notes in a different form.

The test is whether the collection has clear structure and understandable entries. If it contains only heaps of ideas without structure, or worse, undecipherable notes, it cannot support project growth.

Often this means writing more clearly, adding context, and making connections between entries. Material from other people also needs source information. Even «*unknown source*» is better than later mistaking someone else's work for

your own. Consistent formatting can help orientation, which is why templates for ideas and projects are often useful.

Unlike capture, a collection also needs some quality control. Some material only adds noise or dead weight. In those cases, discarding it or sending it directly to cold storage keeps the collection functional.

Collection Becomes Dead Weight

Collections grow and evolve. Not all growth leads to successful projects, and not all ideas turn out useful. So collections accumulate dead weight (see also System Drag on page 28). Without occasional curation or restructuring, they become unwieldy, sluggish, and aversive to use.

Curation can include splitting entries that grew too large, joining similar entries, connecting related entries, creating higher-order entries (e.g., hub or index pages), or updating structural information such as tags.

Some content may also be removed because it has become clutter. But it may still become useful later or stimulate better ideas. Moving it into a separate area, e.g., archive pages, cold storage, that is not searched or used by default preserves it without slowing down the main collection.

How often cleanup is needed depends on discipline, the way ideas develop, and which connections become visible over time.

Using the Collection for Everything

A collection can often hold other information relevant to creative work (see Content of the Collection on page 128). But it is not a hard drive replacement or universal storage system. If everything goes into it, creative energy dissipates across too many unrelated entries.[116]

Large reference or asset collections are usually better stored outside the idea collection, e.g., differentiating between all articles or books you have and those you have actually read, and storing only the latter in the collection.

Huge numbers of entries and large files clog the system, make search less useful, and make backups cumbersome. If needed, selected smaller images or links to particular assets can still be included inside the collection.

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

With idea collections, underflows usually mean failing to make use of the advantages a good collection can provide (see Table 14).

For example, someone may use paper notebooks for capture and try to use those same notebooks as the collection. That can work, with a separate index referencing notebooks and pages, but it is cumbersome. Digitizing the material instead would make it searchable and allow restructuring.

Overflows are also likely when the collection itself becomes the focus or is flooded with too many low-quality ideas. In those cases, more constraints, better quality control, and stronger curation are needed to keep it functional.

Because of its long-term use and central role as idea repository, the collection should be checked regularly to see whether it is still working.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter9

Where it fits into your current creative process:

1. Update your Creative System Map.

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Handling Ideas, Projects and Connections	collection not suited for ideas, projects, or making connections	collection is content-agnostic and links can be created easily	high overhead, e.g., pages need too much metadata or links are hard to create
Collection Type	ignoring structural effects on the collection, leading to accidental growth	let structure emerge first, then shape the collection to support growth	forcing content into an unsuitable structure
Growth, Change, and Retrieval	growth too difficult (e.g., space limited, changes cumbersome)	collection supports the functions well, tool fades into the background, focus stays on realization	collecting takes too much attention away from realizing the work
Long-Term Availability	trusting solutions too much and losing data or access later	check exportability and long-term viability, then using tool fully	being too skeptical and denying oneself good tools
Collection Inbox	no inbox buffer, causing friction through constant small entries without synergy effects	using an Idea Inbox regularly, avoiding both huge backlogs and constant re-entry	inbox becomes an idea drawer, backlog, or unstructured dump
Handling Additional Information	keeping the collection too pure and denying useful synergy effects	connecting ideas to other relevant material where helpful	storing everything in the collection, producing too many unrelated hits
Tools for Collections and Starting	defaulting to a tool without exploring options	making an informed decision and then prioritizing momentum and growth	extensively planning a collection instead of letting it develop
Common Failure Modes	letting the collection grow uncontrolled until it becomes dead weight	clear function: accumulate ideas and support realization of large projects	wasting time on the collection instead of the work; entering, not using; swamp collection; using it for everything

Table 14: Collecting Ideas — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow.

2. Where do your past ideas currently live? Do they grow into projects? Do they re-enter existing projects? Are they externalized and structured, or do they only exist in your mind and reappear occasionally? Do captured things accumulate?
3. Mark whether it constrains output, i.e., is a potential candidate for an Integration Worksheet trial.

Framework: Creative Focus

«Possibly nothing at all; the overflow of my brain would probably, in a state of freedom, have evaporated in a thousand follies ...»

The Abbé's reply to what he might have achieved in freedom, in «The Count of Monte Cristo» by Alexandre Dumas

Ideas alone do not produce creative work. To develop them into viable projects, they need sustained attention and energy. And to be realized and released, projects need enough attention and energy as well.

Thus, creative work depends heavily on where attention and energy are directed.

Ideas open possibilities and push outward.

Projects impose constraints and demand completion.

Creative focus is what regulates both.

This includes long-term orientation (**Creative Direction**), the distribution of attention and energy across multiple possible projects (**Creative Energy**), and the point at which a project moves from ideation into actual realization (**Creative Commitment**).

Chapter 10: Creative Direction

«As a well-spent day brings happy sleep,
so a life well spent brings happy death.»
Leonardo da Vinci

Some people know exactly what they want to achieve with their creativity and focus their creative energy accordingly. They work directly on projects that bring them closer to that goal. Examples include becoming an accomplished musician, a cherished writer or beloved painter, having a successful career in science or engineering, or bringing a bit of creativity into people's everyday lives.

However, strong focus also comes with high risks. Creative work is hard to plan long-term. The creation of new and useful things means that nobody knows in advance whether something will work — whether it is possible and will be accepted. Conditions can also change quickly, e.g., through technological development or societal shifts. Creativity is not like advancing in a bureaucratic organization where stable conditions and promotion criteria show a clear path.

If that creative goal turns out to be unreachable,[117] or worse, not as good as one had imagined,[118] then it can feel as if a great deal of time and energy was wasted. That makes it hard to decide on a creative direction, and even harder to decide which projects to pursue.

However, creative direction can be treated like an expedition into the unknown. You may have an aspiration (e.g., «*write⌣books*», «*make⌣art*»), but there are many different ways to move in that direction. Many of them are equally valid, authentic, interesting, and productive.[119]

Under these conditions, a **Wayfinding** approach can be a viable option. It treats creativity as a lifelong process that can

be influenced to a degree and aligns aspiration, creative projects, and daily practice. Wayfinding is not the only valid way to orient creative work, but it is a useful model when long-term planning is too brittle and drifting is too costly.

It consists of having an **aspiration** that provides orientation even though it can never be reached, determining **waypoints**, i.e. reachable and plannable projects, and having a daily **practice**, i.e. actions that advance those projects and are aligned with the aspiration.

While wayfinding clarifies direction, it does not by itself solve how attention and energy are distributed across multiple competing projects. That is a separate problem (see Creative Energy on page 163).

Aspirations

An aspiration provides **direction**, but in contrast to a goal, it has no end state, so it **can never be achieved**. For example, «*Pursue⌣ mastery in telling stories of tension and revelation that make⌣ complexity engaging.*» is an aspiration.

Once identified, an aspiration provides orientation and supports improvement via a strategic lifetime perspective that outlives individual projects. An aspiration can shape identity and give continuity, but it should not harden into a prestige self-concept that must be defended (see Aspiration Becomes Identity on page 157).

That an aspiration can never be achieved is a feature, not a bug.

Like a star in the sky, it provides guidance — the «*why*». A clear purpose, a vision, a perspective for the future. But it does not constrain action in the way a concrete goal would, and because it cannot be reached, it remains available to you long-term. Thus it is more flexible and enduring, which fits a

world that is hard to predict. And it is often intrinsically motivated through meaning or improvement.

For some people, their aspiration is obvious. It is simply a drive they have — to paint or dance, to find out, or to build. For others, it reveals itself in where their ideas cluster, which leads to specific projects that point to a common theme. They discover it only after wanting to do a specific project — for example, writing a particular book — and then finding out that they enjoy the practice and want to continue. Sometimes it also grows out of life circumstances, e.g., working in a particular domain or field, or a family situation that nudges a person in a certain direction until it is consciously embraced. An aspiration does not have to be a single grand calling. It can also take the form of a recurring theme, question, or direction that organizes your work over time.

An aspiration is more likely to work if it is meaningful to you, fits your strengths well enough that excellence is possible through practice, and creates something of value for others. Desire, craft, and will come together here (see Person on page 49). External response can be one reality check among others — whether people read it, use it, support it, recommend it, or pay for it.[120]

In most cases, an aspiration also implies a domain (e.g., fiction writing) and a field (e.g., mystery readers), and therefore provides a concrete direction.

Whether an aspiration actually works for you is seen in practice — whether the waypoints are reached and whether the daily practice is sustainable. Reality is often different from what one expected, and many glamorous professions come with highly negative aspects as well. Additionally, the aspiration has to fit with other life goals, e.g., health, partner, or family.

Waypoints

Waypoints are **concrete projects** chosen on the basis of the aspiration, the current situation, and the body of work one is building. A body of work is the series of realized projects that belong together over time. It is larger than a single project, but more concrete than an aspiration.

As such, waypoints are reachable goals that support the aspiration and are either reached or not. This places them on the tactical level and ensures that an aspiration has practical consequences. For example, writing a specific novel, building a prototype, publishing an essay series, releasing a game scenario, or completing a non-fiction book.

A good waypoint can be chosen by comparing the available options and selecting a project that advances the aspiration most, puts the person in a better position for the direction that has actually been chosen, without foreclosing too many future options.

However, worthwhile projects may build different bodies of work. A novel, a research paper, a tool, an essay, and a performance may each be good projects. But they do not necessarily require the same capabilities, address the same field, or build toward the same future. Thus, choosing a waypoint often means making a decision which body of work the person wants to build in their limited lifetime (see Creative Finitude and Limits).

Some waypoints are central as they directly develop the body of work. Others are supportive as they strengthen capabilities, visibility, infrastructure, or understanding that the direction needs. And some are distractions, even if they are interesting, because they would consume attention without sufficiently strengthening the aspiration or the body of work.

A waypoint should be both challenging and achievable. Risk and reward need to be considered in order to select a

waypoint that puts you in a better position. It should also have the right scope — large enough to matter, but small enough to be reachable under current conditions. If it mainly explores an adjacent direction, the waypoint should usually be smaller — an essay instead of a book, a short story instead of a novel, a prototype instead of a platform, or a scenario instead of a whole game line.

As concrete projects, waypoints determine the knowledge and skills that are needed, including which new skills, mentoring, guidance, or networking may be required. They are also close enough in time to allow pragmatic planning: How to reach the goal, which milestones make sense, which resources need to remain available, and what can be used as feedback on progress.

Because things often change during realization, deviations are possible. For example, a series of essays may turn into a book. Often the work can even be improved by using iterative waypoints. One might first publish the essays, then use reader feedback to turn them into a better book as the next waypoint.

Done well, waypoints provide meaning. You achieve something concrete by realizing them, demonstrate competence, improve craftsmanship, and develop self-efficacy.

A new waypoint is selected once a waypoint is either reached or the kill criteria are triggered, e.g., progress is too slow or the waypoint is no longer reachable. By then the situation has changed — you learned during the project, the environment changed, and the domain and field shifted. And because the aspiration preserves overall direction, the next waypoints are not only different, but often more challenging and interesting.

That is how you go farther in the right direction.

Practice

Daily practice[121] is where aspiration and waypoints become **actionable** — the embodiment of creativity. The concrete waypoint makes it possible to focus on the present — on what needs to be done today in order to make progress, and on how close one is to reaching it.

The focus is on reaching the next waypoint, i.e. completing the current project. Thus, you can see when you are getting closer, and daily practice is aligned with the waypoint and through it with the aspiration.

Because drift and entropy over time are likely, regular reflection and correction are needed to stay on course or adjust it. While the waypoint is fixed, the methods used to reach it can be changed if needed, e.g., tools, routines, or working methods.

In practice, this means investing at least the minimum amount of time and effort needed to make meaningful progress toward that waypoint. Even with an unpredictable life, it is often possible to block a few hours and reserve some energy on workdays. The point is to establish routines so the work becomes a normal element of life, i.e., time for ideas, for generating and capturing, and protected time for creation.

For example, doing two deep-work phases each workday to make progress on a novel. The concrete work can differ depending on the phase of the project — broad research into themes such as forensics or psychology, long walks to enable associative drift, working on an outline to get the structure right, or long focused writing sessions.

If practice aligns with waypoints, you can embrace the journey.[122] You know that the daily practice is moving you toward your destination, and you can enjoy discovery, personal growth, and learning. You celebrate concrete achievements and learn from clear setbacks.

Doing Wayfinding

Wayfinding still involves planning and decision-making, because it covers long- (aspiration), mid- (next waypoint), and short-term (daily practice) perspectives. But it does not require a static long-term plan that is unlikely to hold.

Instead, it is iterative — both fixed (aspiration, current waypoint) and flexible (future waypoints). It also removes the pressure to «*get it right*», to find the one best path that is unlikely to exist at all, or at least is unlikely to remain stable long enough to be useful.

Thus, you can look at the current situation and the next possible projects (waypoints) and choose the one that best supports your aspiration (see Figure 11). The aspiration provides orientation, which prevents blundering around by simply going for what sounds good in the moment. It also encourages progress and improvement by making more demanding waypoints visible over time. Life has a direction, you develop as a creative person, and the completed waypoints become a portfolio of your work.

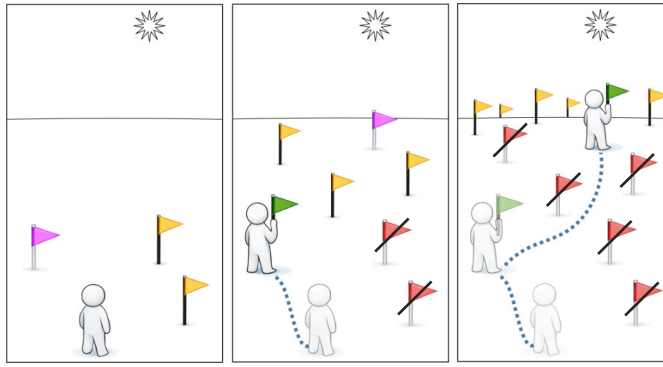

Figure 11: Wayfinding. Left: Examine possible waypoints (projects, flags), pick the one that best supports the aspiration (star; see Rubicon). Middle: After reaching that waypoint (finished the project), new waypoints can be reached (project ideas) and some are no longer available (crossed out). Faced with the new situation, the next waypoint that best supports the aspiration is selected. Right: After reaching the next waypoint the process repeats.

Creative Finitude and Limits

Wayfinding becomes more difficult when there is not just one possible direction, but several. The aspiration may be clear enough to guide work, and the next waypoint may be reachable, yet different possible bodies of work can still compete for the same finite life.

This is the problem of creative finitude.

Because a life is finite, there are limits on what can be pursued. Even a well-functioning creative system cannot realize every valuable possibility. In fact, the better ideas are generated, captured, and collected, the more clearly this limit becomes visible. A good system prevents accidental loss, but it cannot remove the need for deliberate loss — some good projects will not be realized, or not by you, or not now.

This is true even within a single creative direction. If you want to write books, you will still not write all the books you could write. At some point, one book will be the last.[123]

It applies even more strongly if multiple creative directions are possible. Ideas and possible projects may cluster around different long-term directions, each of which could become a serious body of work. One might be drawn toward fiction, scientific work, game design, essays, tools, teaching, or art — and each direction could be meaningful, fitting, and useful.

Multiple creative directions can each generate plausible projects, require different capabilities, imply different audiences, and develop the person in different ways. Choosing an aspiration narrows these possibilities, but often does not decide them completely. A broad aspiration may still support several possible bodies of work. Thus, creative direction also requires deciding which body of work is actually being built — and therefore which creative life is currently being lived.

This is a limitation of a bounded life, not a failure of creativity or of the creative system.

For example, «*pursue⌣ mastery in telling stories of tension and revelation that make⌣ complexity engaging*» might support several bodies of work — mystery novels, essays, role-playing scenarios, films, or narrative non-fiction. All may fit the aspiration, but each develops a different life. Choosing one does not prove that the others were false, but only recognizes that a life cannot be lived in all directions at once.[124]

Following one creative direction allows a body of work to develop over time — a series of realized projects that belong together, strengthen each other, and make later work easier or more visible. Skill accumulates, standards improve, references become reusable, and others can begin to understand what kind of work to expect from you.

Deciding on one creative direction and selecting projects accordingly allows you to ask:

- Which body of work would this project belong to?
- Does this body of work support my current aspiration?
- Am I actually building this body of work, or only attracted to the possible identity it suggests?
- Would realizing this project put me in a better position for the creative life I am actually living?
- Can this direction be represented by a smaller project instead of becoming a major commitment?

Thus, wayfinding requires limits. Without them, too many possible directions remain active, and the person is pulled between several creative lives. The result looks like abundance, but functionally it reduces what can be achieved over a lifetime.

Lives Not Lived

The focus on one creative direction makes the realized work more impactful and more likely to succeed. However, the unchosen creative lives can still hurt. It is easy to imagine «*what would have been*», because the imagined life is unencumbered by the friction that going in that direction would have brought. Still, there are ways to reduce the pain.

Some possible creative lives do not need to be lived fully in order to be honored. They can be represented by an emissary project, i.e., a small, bounded artifact that gives the direction a concrete form without letting it dominate the system. For example, a short story may represent a larger fiction direction, a single essay may represent a philosophical direction, or a small game scenario may represent a game-design direction. Side projects (see Creative Energy on page 163) are well suited for this approach.

Other directions may need sanctuary. They are serious enough to be acknowledged as valuable, but are kept in a way that prevents them from interfering with daily practice. They can be preserved in a dedicated part of the idea collection and revisited after specific waypoints have been reached. In contrast to cold storage ideas or active projects, the sanctuary preserves a possible direction without pretending that it can be lived now.

Some directions should be consciously relinquished. Not every interesting possibility deserves a continuing claim on attention. This means recognizing that — given the aspiration, current body of work, and finite life — it will not be pursued. Relinquishing them to cold storage prevents the collection from becoming a place where unlived lives accumulate as quiet accusations.

Thus, creative direction often also means deciding which possible creative lives are lived, represented, preserved, or relinquished.

Common Failure Modes of Wayfinding

Wayfinding also has its own risks, which lead to several common failure modes.

Aspiration Becomes Identity

An aspiration should provide direction, e.g., «*Pursue mastery in telling stories.*» But when an aspiration becomes an identity, it stops functioning as orientation and becomes a self-concept that must be defended. An identity such as «*I am a writer*» replaces writing books — and anything that challenges that image is resisted because it feels like ego death.

Typical signs are that people cling to the aspiration-identity because it is usually a glamorous prestige identity that flatters them, they avoid evidence that the actual practice does not fit, keep the label while not doing the work, or reject adjacent directions because they seem «*beneath*» the identity.

For example, if someone sees himself as a novelist, then writing non-fiction may feel as if it challenges that identity. Exploring that form of writing would seem like failure rather than expansion. This way identity becomes a trap that prevents both creative work and its improvement.

Thus, keep the aspiration as a guiding star, not as an identity.

Aspiration Is Too Abstract

An aspiration can never be reached, but it still has to be concrete enough to guide behavior. Abstract aspirations such as «*I want to tell the truth*», «*I want to inspire humanity*», or «*I want to create meaningful things*» provide too little guidance about which waypoints to choose. They rule out too little.

Thus, an aspiration has to reduce options, generate waypoints, and constrain practice.

Too Many Possible Lives

Sometimes a person can imagine several creative lives that would be worth living. Each has real appeal, each generates projects, and each can be defended as meaningful. The person is pulled in multiple directions at once.

Typical signs are that ideas cluster around several incompatible bodies of work, that every project seems justified, that already-made decisions are repeatedly reopened, or that side projects become covert attempts to start another creative life. The person may still complete work, but the overall direction becomes unstable. Too much attention is spent deciding what kind of creator to be.

The issue is which long-term direction is actually being lived — something that cannot be solved by just choosing the next project.

One intervention is to classify the competing directions explicitly[125] — primary, supporting, emissary, sanctuary, or relinquished. The important point here is that the classification must be deliberate. It acknowledges the value of other directions while preventing them from quietly overruling the one that has been chosen. Otherwise each attractive idea can present itself as an exception, and the same decision has to be made again and again.

Thus, if several creative lives are possible, decide which one is currently being lived — and classify what status the others have.

Waypoints Become Detached from Aspiration

Waypoints may be chosen by mood, glamour, or convenience rather than by fit to the aspiration. While occasional exploratory or just-for-fun projects can be useful (see Creative Energy on page 163), haphazard project choice wastes too much energy and produces too little progress.

This can also happen when several possible bodies of work compete. A project may fit one possible creative life very well, but not the one currently being lived. For example, a short story, a product idea, a performance, or a research question may be genuinely promising, but still pull attention away from the primary direction. So the quality must not decide the issue by itself.

Instead, a project should be chosen with the questions: «*Which aspiration and body of work does this project serve?*» and «*Is this the project that makes the greatest progress toward that direction and puts me in a better position once I have realized it?*» If the answer is no, the project may still be kept in sanctuary, turned into an emissary project, or relinquished — but it should not automatically become the next waypoint.

Disconnected Practice

Some people like the image or prestige of an aspiration or waypoint, but not the daily reality required to sustain it. They want to *have done* the work — *having written* that book, *having given* the performance — without wanting the daily practice that would be required. This is especially true of glamorous professions whose actual practice is often repetitive, lonely, tedious, physically static, or socially difficult.

This does not mean that missing or inconsistent daily practice automatically invalidates the aspiration. In some cases, however, the mismatch can be more easily addressed by determining a different aspiration, one that aligns with what a person is actually willing to do each day. In other cases, it may be because you do not yet know how to reach that waypoint, or because you have not yet developed the skills to do so. In such cases, changing the scope can help — reducing it to something easier to achieve. For example, writing a blog post instead of a book. Choosing the right scope can be used to strengthen one's capabilities.

Thus, check whether you can actually sustain the practice required by the aspiration and the current waypoint. Regular practice is truthful here. If not, change the aspiration or adapt the waypoint.

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

Flow problems can occur in the three aspects of wayfinding and in creative finitude and limits (see Table 15).

Even if you do not do wayfinding, looking at where you want to go and what you are doing each day is usually enlightening. The supplemental materials, especially the Integra-

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Aspiration	no clear direction, blundering around, little directed progress	clear, desired, and possible aspiration, clear primary direction, others are supporting, represented, preserved, or relinquished	premature narrowing, locked into a specific career path or goal, high risk if that goal is not reached or not as good as expected
Waypoints	next project is chosen by mood or by what seems easiest	deliberate selection of the next waypoint based on aspiration and current position	rumination and analysis paralysis, inability to abandon waypoints that no longer make sense
Practice	no consistency, starting and abandoning work frequently	practice aligned with aspiration and waypoints, with time for other activities	overscheduled, too much focus on creative work, life becomes brittle
Creative Finitude and Limits	limits are not set; too many possible lives remain eligible; decisions are repeatedly reopened	finite life is acknowledged; directions are lived, represented, preserved, or relinquished	premature narrowing; excessive pruning; valuable directions are excluded before they are understood

Table 15: Creative Direction — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow.

tion Worksheet, can be used to test whether changes align better with your overall goals.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter10

Where it fits into your current creative process:

1. Update your Creative System Map.
2. What is your aspiration, what is your next waypoint, and how well are they connected to your actual practice?
3. Are the projects you are doing now what you want to leave behind?
4. Mark whether it constrains output, i.e., is a potential candidate for an Integration Worksheet trial.

Chapter 11: Creative Energy

> «People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on. But that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully.»
>
> *Steve Jobs*

Time, attention, decision capacity, and implementation energy are limited. That makes the allocation of creative energy across projects a crucial issue.

A frequent problem in creative work is that energy gets spread over too many projects. This happens when idea pressure is high, e.g., because many interesting ideas are generated, or when the pressure to finish individual projects is low, e.g., no external deadlines and low commitment. Many projects are started because many ideas seem worthwhile.

This situation can feel comforting. Creativity is inherently risky — you can make success more likely, but never guarantee it. So you are not putting all your eggs in one basket. It also becomes easy to shift attention whenever a project becomes difficult («*the grass is greener on the other side*»).

However, if too many projects compete for attention, creative energy is diffused so strongly that little progress is made anywhere. Frequent switching fragments focus even further. Without a clear project hierarchy, overall progress stalls and the whole system starts to break down. The work may feel busy, but few if any artifacts get completed.

If too many live projects, constant switching, and implementation avoidance are issues for you, then **project segmentation** might be worth trying. It is not the only viable structure, but it is a powerful one when attention diffuses across too many possible projects.

Project Segmentation

Segmentation differentiates which kinds of attention and energy projects receive (see Figure 12).

It distinguishes between:

- **one core project** that receives the implementation energy and most of the ideation, so it is the main focus of the creative work,
- **multiple central projects** that receive ideation and light structuring only, so they grow over time,
- **unlimited peripheral projects** that hold ideas but are not actively pursued, so they do not draw attention or energy, and
- occasional **highly time-limited side projects** that provide quick wins and thus help maintain morale.[126]

A clear focus on the core project concentrates energy and allows for strong progress, which is essential for mastery and often for success — especially in domains with high competitive pressure. It does require discipline and may reduce spontaneity somewhat (see Lack of Discipline on page 171 and Repressed Spontaneity on page 172), but it increases the chance that projects are actually finished.

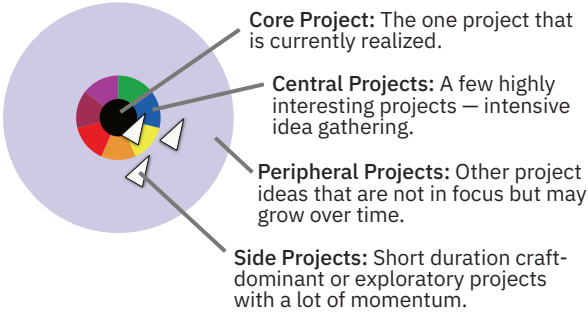
Core Project: The one project that is currently realized.
Central Projects: A few highly interesting projects — intensive idea gathering.
Peripheral Projects: Other project ideas that are not in focus but may grow over time.
Side Projects: Short duration craft-dominant or exploratory projects with a lot of momentum.

Figure 12: Project Segmentation.

Core Project (Execution; one project only)

The core project is the main focus of creative energy and attention. Ideally, it is the only project that has crossed the **Rubicon** (see Creative Commitment on page 175) and therefore has the highest gravity with a self-reinforcing feedback loop and increasing returns.

While it is not the only project worth doing, it is the home base that currently receives implementation energy — execution, commitment, convergence, and structured problem-solving. If Wayfinding is used (see Creative Direction on page 147), the core project is the current waypoint.

In some cases, having only one implemented core project is not possible or not sensible. In work contexts, for example, there is often little choice — one may have multiple clients or multiple externally assigned projects. In some domains, doing only one project would also be inefficient, for example when feedback takes time to arrive or technical conditions impose waiting periods. In such cases, it can still help to limit focus to one project at a time for a bounded period — for example, parts of the week or day. If several projects must be active, they should usually be smaller in scope. But even then, multitasking must be avoided as it comes with high switching costs and fragmented attention.

The core project is worked on regularly and with the highest priority of all projects, usually each workday and for a meaningful amount of time, so that it can be finished as soon as possible.[127] By maintaining this focus, energy returns to the same project again and again until it is either realized or aborted (kill criteria triggered, see Creative Commitment on page 175). Only then is a new core project chosen. This limits project-hopping when — not if — the core project becomes difficult.

Central Projects (Ideation; five to seven)

Central projects are promising future projects that are important enough to justify continued ideation. They live in the idea collection, have medium gravity, and receive medium attention. To avoid spreading ideation energy too thin, they should be limited to five to seven projects.

The main distinction from the core project is that central projects are not currently being implemented. Work on them is limited to ideation and light structuring, not commitment-heavy realization work. If prototyping is needed in order to test a hard problem, it should be treated as a dedicated, time-bounded side project.

Keeping several central projects **at the ideation stage** has a number of advantages.

- **It reduces the temptation to start realizing a project immediately:** With highly resonant ideas, there might be a hard-to-ignore urge: «*This new idea is so cool, I must pursue it now.*» However, you do not have to deny yourself the pleasure of engaging with these ideas. On the contrary, you can do so without guilt, because the ideas are allowed to grow as central projects. Only realization is postponed until the core project is finished.
- **It allows you to identify and address the hard problems:** During the long growth phase from initial idea to realization, you can test a proof of concept as a side project or develop approaches to the difficult parts.[128] Thus, the project benefits from not having to be realized immediately.
- **Restorative Breaks from Implementation:** Implementing the core project often requires concentration, becomes emotionally demanding when things do not work, and can lead to decision fatigue. Ideation in central projects — and nothing beyond that — can be refreshing and restorative as the cognitive demands are different.

- **Avoiding the Sunk Cost Fallacy:** Having several central projects weakens the «*I have already invested so much in this, so I should realize it*» pressure. After all, implementation has not started yet — they have only been explored.
- **Avoiding the post-project void:** A lot of structure breaks away when a core project is finished. That can be aversive — up to existential despair («*What now?*»). With central projects, you have several options in the pipeline and can just choose the next project.

Central projects can exist in different degrees of readiness. Some may already be fairly developed, others may still contain major unresolved issues. Their level of seriousness can vary as well — some are provisional, some serious, some playful.

To keep central projects alive, a short description is useful — for example, a brief «*why it matters*» paragraph — plus a lightweight structure that stimulates further idea generation. For example, sections for characters, plot, setting, and so on for a fiction story.

Peripheral Projects (Possibility; unlimited)

Peripheral projects have low gravity, receive no active attention, and involve little if any work. They are just ideas, or barely more than that — speculative seeds for possible future projects.

They often result from free ideation or from noticing a problem. Since suppressing free ideation would kill it, but turning every idea into a project that is realized would diffuse energy too much, peripheral projects simply ensure that ideas remain available for the future. They stay in the background so they do not compete with central projects.

Therefore, they have to stay small — perhaps just a title, a short summary, and a few fragments. No planning, no structure, no development, because otherwise they begin to

mutate into central projects and too many central projects diffuse attention and energy too much.

As promoting or demoting a project changes the flow of creative energy, turning a peripheral project into the central project, or vice versa, should be a deliberate decision.

Side Projects (Very Quick; max. one to two days)

A core project can take months or even years, central projects grow only as ideas without being implemented, and peripheral projects just hold captured ideas. This means creative work can become demotivating when there is nothing «*real*» to show for — no finished pieces, no releases, and no visible wins.

In such cases, highly time- and scope-bounded side projects can be a lifeline.

The focus here is on craft-dominant or exploratory projects with a lot of momentum. They are small in scope, have little mass and high bursts of energy, so they can be realized quickly, often on break days, without interfering with the core project.

That requires that few if any decisions are needed. The hard problems are already solved or the main focus of the side project, e.g., doing a proof of concept or solving the hard problem as explicit goal.

These side projects are not slow-growing central projects, but small implementable ones. They must be strongly time-bounded, otherwise they sprawl easily (see Side Projects Break Out on page 172). If they cannot be finished within that period, or begin to interfere with the core project, they should be aborted and/or returned to the collection.

If Wayfinding is used, side projects also preserve exploration, flexibility, curiosity, and play while the broader aspiration remains intact. Creative work can be serious, and there is

much to be said for highly focused, highly conscientious work. But without play and exploration, improvement often becomes merely incremental rather than transformative.

For example, even if your aspiration is to write mystery novels, it can still be rewarding to explore other forms of writing, or even other media. Provisional, playful, and with no concern about whether they move you closer to the larger aspiration. Simply exploring something interesting. Sometimes such experiments lead to important later projects. And if not, that is fine too.

Doing Project Segmentation

Project segmentation depends on the idea collection (see Collecting Ideas on page 127), which functions in part like an enhanced someday list. It reduces the pressure to realize all ideas at once, because ideas and projects that are not currently being realized are stored in it and cannot be lost.

Segmentation requires a deliberate decision about the core project (see Creative Commitment on page 175) and the selection of five to seven central projects. If no project is currently ready to be realized, then only central projects exist and continue to grow until one is chosen as core project.

The core project always comes first, with deep-work phases each workday. Because realizing a project requires many decisions, and decisions are cognitively tiring, breaks during the day are necessary. Full break days are necessary as well for longer projects. Otherwise the core project itself becomes aversive and after a while, you just «*can't stand the project anymore*». During these breaks, moving into the ideation phase of central projects can be both relaxing and energizing.

Because central projects are not being implemented, they require fewer decisions and therefore do not interfere much with progress on the core project. Switching between these

different cognitive-load profiles can help maintain long-term momentum without burnout. It should also help prevent abandoning a temporarily tedious or difficult core project simply because another project still allows for exciting idea generation. Instead, you take a break, then return to the core project and work on the issue. If a quick win is needed, a short side project can be done on a break day or two.

However, because playing with an exciting project can be far more fun than working through a tedious phase of the core project, discipline is still needed. Otherwise central or side projects can displace the core project at exactly the wrong moment. The core project therefore has to come first — for example, by doing the deep-work phases before exploring central or side projects.[129] If ideas for other projects occur during that time, just capture them quickly. Afterwards, they are not explored further but the work returns to the core project.

Project positions can change over time. A peripheral project can become a central project, but this usually means that a central project has to be demoted. Sometimes a project simply no longer feels interesting, or its moment has passed. Often ideas that initially seemed brilliant fade after the first enthusiasm disappears, while other ideas are generated and fleshed out. The core project, however, should remain fixed until it is either realized or the kill criteria are triggered. A hard or tedious phase is not sufficient reason to abandon it.

This segmentation approach is especially useful for people who need novelty, have low inhibition, and have difficulty sustaining implementation. The core project advances every workday, while central and peripheral projects still provide novelty when the core project becomes boring, without derailing execution. Idea bursts are captured and added to the collection. You can still play with wild ideas, just not realize them yet.

In practice, a person might work on a non-fiction book that requires attention over many months, for example, one or two deep-work phases each workday. At the same time, other project ideas provide space for play, e.g., fiction, research, or sewing. But they remain at the ideation and structuring stage, and this exploration happens mostly during breaks. Other ideas accumulate as peripheral projects. One or two may become central projects, while stale central projects are demoted. A few side projects are realized as well, for example, sewing a pen case, writing an RPG scenario, or a guide to a Constraint Planner. Because the focus remains on the core project throughout, it progresses and gets finished.[130]

Common Failure Modes of Creative Energy

Common failure modes here are diffused energy, lack of discipline, mixing segments, side projects breaking out, and repressed spontaneity.

Diffused Energy

If energy is spread over too many projects, progress stalls. The attempt to do everything results in not doing very much at all.

It does not have to be the exact segmentation model proposed here, but some way of focusing energy is needed.

Lack of Discipline

It can be difficult to keep the segments intact, especially if you are used to more spontaneous project work. However, this does not have to rely on sheer discipline alone. Segmentation can be made easier by structuring the environment so that the core project stays in focus and central and peripheral projects stay in their place. For example, the core project can be made more salient in the workspace, while central projects

get dedicated sections in the idea collection and peripheral projects are kept in a less salient area.

Mixing Segments

It is often tempting to work on central projects as if they were lesser core projects, or to expand peripheral projects into central ones without noticing. But that destroys the main advantage of the system that the core project comes first.

If central projects are treated like secondary core projects, they compete not only for time but also for decisions. Even when the time is available, the energy needed to make good decisions degrades quickly, and both the core project and the central ones suffer. If peripheral projects are treated like central projects and actively expanded, energy is diffused over too many fronts.

Thus, keep the segments clean.

Side Projects Break Out

Side projects allow you to experience the joy and self-efficacy of finishing things even while the core project takes weeks, months, or years.

But side projects can easily break out. Instead of taking a day or two, they suddenly take weeks. Whether because a hard problem was overlooked or because they are simply more fun, they begin to interfere with the core project.

That is why they need hard constraints with kill criteria.

Repressed Spontaneity

Adhering to the segments can also reduce spontaneity, sometimes too much. If every creative impulse that does not fit neatly into the scheme is denied, the system starts doing damage.

While focus on the core project is necessary for finishing it, especially with complex work, there must still be room for play and exploration. Side projects allow this, provided they remain bounded and do not interfere with the core project.

Done well, you get the freedom to explore interesting things while the core project still progresses.

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

Flow problems in creative energy often involve either too few or too many active projects (see Table 16).

It matters how your creative energy is currently focused. If the present balance of your projects diffuses energy too much, then segmentation might help.

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Core Projects	not deciding on one; starting and quitting quickly when work becomes hard or tedious; no force behind projects	clear focus on one core project that always comes first	starting many projects and trying to pursue them equally despite energy spreading thin
Central Projects	having none or too few; risk of falling into a hole when the core project is done	keeping a handful of central projects growing without implementing them	having too many; trying to implement them so they compete with the core project
Peripheral Projects	having none, so no growth while working on other projects	large collection with deliberate movement into central projects when warranted	making them too salient so they act like central projects and drain attention
Side Projects	doing none, resulting in long phases without finishing anything	occasional side projects for exploration and quick wins	side projects gain too much mass and displace the core project

Table 16: Creative Energy — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter11

Where it fits into your current creative process:

1. Update your Creative System Map.
2. Which projects are you currently working on? How much energy and attention do they receive? Is there a deliberate core project, central projects, and peripheral projects? If you work on a single long project, do you make room for side projects?
3. Mark whether it constrains output, i.e., is a potential candidate for an Integration Worksheet trial.

Chapter 12: Creative Commitment

«Alea iacta est.»
[The die is cast.]
Julius Caesar

Some people know exactly which project they want to realize — and then work on it. Sometimes this happens by choice, sometimes because the project is given to them, e.g., in work contexts.

Often, however, several possible projects are available, so a decision has to be made. That decision may be spontaneous, obvious, or deliberate, based on Wayfinding (see pages 147ff), Project Segmentation (see pages 163ff), both, or neither. But at some point, there is a decision to realize a project.

And that changes things in the creative system.

Implementation Focus

Once the decision to implement a project is made — once the **Rubicon** is crossed — the project shifts from possibility and exploration to constraint and execution. This changes the nature of ideation and of the work itself.

Now things get real.

Free or Open Creative Ideation is reduced (see page 97), because ideation becomes more focused as constraints are applied and ideas have to work. Previously, ideas were just ideas and you could play with them. Now they encounter resistance, limits, and reality.

As the project will either be realized or not, there will be a result. If it fails, it is a real failure, if it succeeds, it will be a real triumph.

In this sense, starting a project is an integration test — both for the ideas and for you: Can the ideas survive contact with sustained work and reality? Can you invest the energy and craft needed to make them work under real conditions?

Constraints as Consequence

Realizing a project depends on much more than conviction alone, e.g., valuing a project or deciding to focus on it. Historically, crossing the Rubicon was not a statement of intent, but **an action that created consequences**. In creative work, the equivalent is introducing consequences that make progress unavoidable.

This can mean reorganizing conditions — environment, structure, or obligations — so that the project advances despite competing possibilities. Such constraints give the project priority in practice, e.g., reducing competing claims on time or energy, suspending competing projects temporarily, allocating fixed work time, producing work that requires continuation, or exposing the work to real deadlines or audiences. Two especially useful constraints are Release and Kill Criteria. They prevent both overcommitment and project hopping.

Without these constraints, a project may be started because it feels right, but as other activities displace project work, it quickly drifts or stalls. The result is often a feeling of personal failure, of not being motivated enough, when in fact the constraints were insufficient. With constraints, a project becomes a contract with your future self — you will either release the project or abort it.

Because starting a project is essentially a large-scale integration, you can use the Integration Worksheet to test the consequences and evaluate whether this change leads to sustained realization or merely shifts intention. If the struc-

ture does not hold, adjust it. If it does hold, the project has moved from exploration into implementation.

Scope of the Project

In order to decide whether to implement a project, a rough idea of its form and scope is needed. What will the project be?

Sometimes this is obvious — e.g., an app that performs a specific function, or a book on a specific topic. But even then ask: What is needed for that project to be viable?

Can you write down what the **minimum viable project** is and what its **distinctive value** would be? Can you imagine it, play with it, e.g., walk through how a member of the target audience would interact with it?

Form and scope can still change during realization. There is rarely a straight line from idea to realization, and the design space often contains surprises. But being able to define the initial form and scope shows whether the project has enough conceptual clarity.

If you cannot yet see the project clearly enough — e.g., to answer the Rubicon Criteria (see page 179) — the project is probably not ripe for realization. In that case, keeping it in the idea collection and letting it grow as a Central Project (see page 166) might be more useful.

Standards, Release and Kill Criteria

Projects usually benefit immensely from having clear standards, as well as release and kill criteria. Otherwise the risk of producing zombie projects (see Project Realization on page 193) or not releasing the project (see Project Release on page 231) is too high.

Standards protect the project both from unreachable perfectionism and from gradual dilution. They help to apply the craft logic of «*If I'm gonna do this, I'm doing it right.*»

This craft logic combines the decision to do it at all — **commitment** — with the **standard** you are holding yourself to.

Most people separate these questions. They drift into commitments half-consciously (e.g., «*Let's start doing that …*»), then negotiate quality downward to conserve effort (e.g., «*I think this might be good enough …*»). The craft logic prevents that. Once the standards are set and the threshold of entry is crossed, dilution is off the table.

So what would «*doing it right*» mean for this project? How polished should it be? How much should be created? How fast? How consistently? How many resources can be used? At what personal cost?[131]

These standards are then bounded by the release and kill criteria:

Release criteria define what has to be implemented for the project to be released. They are not «*success criteria*», because success is determined at least in part by the field. But they set and maintain the standards.

They should be high enough for ethical craftsmanship — the work is actually good and you are willing to stand behind it — while avoiding perfectionism, because perfection is impossible (see Figure 5 on page 59).

Without release criteria, it is too easy to end up in endless optimization loops, where one attribute is maximized (e.g., readability) at the cost of another (e.g., completeness), and the work oscillates without moving toward release. Especially when invested effort raises fear of evaluation by the field, endless fiddling without substantial improvement becomes likely.

Kill criteria are conditions that, if they occur during realization, lead you to abort the project (e.g., «*If by date◡ X, I have◡ not reached state◡ Y, I'll quit.*», via Duke, 2022). Setting them in advance and in writing prevents you from having to make that decision while tired, emotional, or exhausted.

Kill criteria protect against common fallacies and traps, e.g., sunk-cost fallacy, escalating commitment, or shifting from hard problems to easy ones in order to preserve the illusion of progress. Once triggered, they stop you from continuing to invest resources in zombie projects that are not worth it but drain resources from projects that might actually work (see Project Realization on page 193).

Kill criteria can also protect against project hopping by **not** triggering. Even when a project becomes tedious, because of organizational overhead, formatting, or other friction, that does not meet the kill criteria. So there is no reason, or excuse, to postpone or abort it.

There are some situations in which kill criteria may justifiably be ignored. For example, if your planning was off because intensive work uncovered additional material that makes the project much better, then the changed situation may justify an extension. In contrast, if the work was haphazard because your heart was not in it, the kill criterion should end the project and free you to invest in something better suited.

So, looking at your project: Under which conditions will you release it or abort it? When does implementation stop? Which deadlines are non-negotiable? Who holds you accountable?

Rubicon Criteria

The following checklist shows decision criteria that can be applied once the Scope of the Project (see page 177) is clear.

It is meant as decision support to help answer the question whether a project is ready to cross the Rubicon, i.e. whether it would make a good Core Project (see page 165). Not all criteria will matter for every project. For smaller projects that take only a few days and few resources, just trying to realize them is often more efficient.

There is also something to be said for planning optimism, i.e. underestimating the amount of time and work required. Many creative projects would never have been realized if their creators had known in advance how much work they would take.[132] But for larger projects, these criteria can help avoid suboptimal choices that waste precious resources.

1. Contribution

First determine the target group. What actual contribution does the project make for it?

1. **Usefulness:** What concrete problem is the project supposed to solve? What makes that issue relevant?
2. **Value:** How high is the actual value or impact for that group — not merely assumed?[133]
3. **Newness:** Is the idea or project actually new? Who is the competition? What is the status quo you compete against? This requires research into similar or identical ideas, e.g., via market, literature, or competition research.
4. **Acceptance:** How well will the target group understand it? How well will they accept it?

2. Feasibility

Second, how feasible is the project?

1. **Solvable Problems:** Are the hard problems (monkey problems) solved, or are there at least promising and tested ideas for how to solve them (see also Hard Problems Not Solved on page 184)? To avoid paper solutions,

ex-ante evaluation, preliminary analysis, prototypes, rough drafts, a quick check of whether the numbers work, or expert feedback can help.

2. **Sufficient Resources:** Can you actually implement the project with the resources you have? These include time, money, material, access to the domain and field, etc. Is collaboration or delegation needed and available? Rough estimates are sufficient, but the planning fallacy will usually lead to an underestimation. Looking at past planning versus reality can serve as correction.
3. **Access to the Field:** Can you get feedback from the people who decide whether the project is creative (target audience or its gatekeepers)? Do you have access to it for distribution?
4. **Timing:** Is the timing right (*Zeitgeist*)? Is the necessary technology or infrastructure available and stable enough? This is hard to predict, but it is possible to be too early, and being the first-mover is not always an advantage.

3. Personal Fit

Third, how well does it actually fit to you?

1. **Wayfinding:** Is this project a worthwhile waypoint in relation to your aspiration? Better than the alternatives?
2. **Person Aspects:** Do desire (e.g., motivation, interest, meaning, resonance), craft (e.g., knowledge and skills), and will (e.g., courage and persistence) align?

4. Ethical Fit

Fourth, ethics becomes an issue when projects are implemented. Entertaining ideas does not mean accepting them, but once you start implementing them, you become responsible for them. See also the supplemental materials.

1. **Main Effects:** What changes once the project is finished? Who can or will use it? Is it a positive contribution, or does it exploit human weaknesses?
2. **Side Effects/Far-reaching Effects:** What are the possible side effects or far-reaching effects?

Assessing the Criteria

It is unlikely that a project will score highly on all of these at once. And things will change during the project, especially the person aspects. You may realize that you need more knowledge or skill — either by learning or by delegation — and projects usually contain phases that are tedious, difficult, or simply annoying.

But if chosen well, realizing a creative project should be a positive, even rewarding experience. At the very least, it should end with a sense of accomplishment.

Decision Conflicts

When several possible projects are available, more than one may qualify to cross the Rubicon. For example, you may have several Central Projects (see page 166) that have progressed far enough to be realizable — the hard problems are solved — and more than one of them would make a valid Waypoint aligned with your Aspiration (see pages 147ff).

Because implementation energy is limited, starting more than one would usually diffuse that energy too much. Not only would each project receive only part of the available energy, but switching costs and attention residue would dilute that energy even further. Progress is then likely to be slow and unsatisfactory.

As the unchosen projects remain in the idea collection, the question is usually not «*either-or*», but rather «*first-second*». That should reduce the pressure to decide immediately. It

should also help that the unchosen projects can continue to grow in the collection and may actually profit from not being chosen yet.

In some cases, however, there are genuine goal conflicts in which the unchosen projects cannot simply be realized later. Time and resources may allow only one project, and there may be no way to combine the competing options. Nor may there be another project in the collection that beats both.

There are different methods for dealing with such goal conflicts, for example:

- **Argue:** Two people, or one person and an AI, argue, one for each project. However, the sides are switched repeatedly to avoid hardened fronts and emotional attachment to one specific project.
- **Prioritization Grid:** Put the possible projects onto a grid using two key metrics on the x- and y-axis,[134] e.g., Impact × Feasibility, or Elegance × Functionality, or Newness × Usefulness, or Feasibility × Value. To avoid being biased by the clustering, rate the possible projects on both axes before starting to put projects on the grid.
- **Metric Formula:** Use more than two metrics and combine them mathematically, e.g., by squaring and then multiplying them: $\text{Impact}^2 \times \text{Feasibility}^2 \times \text{ROI}^2$. Squaring them first punishes low values more strongly than simple multiplication.

Common Failure Modes

When it comes to deciding on a project to realize, common failure modes are that hard problems are not solved, the idea not being new, the idea not being useful, abandonment or project hopping, crossing the Rubicon too eagerly, and hesitating to start.

Hard Problems Not Solved

Feasibility is a hard barrier — see Working on the Wrong Problem on page 104. Not solving the Monkey problems first can lead to nasty surprises during the realization.

For example, some problems can turn out to be **gravity problems** that cannot be solved, only designed around. Others are **wicked problems** that are hard to define and resistant to solution.[135] If you cannot solve the hard problems or they surprise you during realization, they can stall or even prevent progress. Worst case is a zombie project that does not advance and simply consumes brainpower and other resources until it is killed.

Keeping project ideas in the idea collection until the hard problems are solved avoids much of this. Focus on the problem itself and the focused ideation needed to solve it, without the overhead that comes with treating it as a full project. You may still be surprised during realization if something was overlooked, but the risk is lower.

For example, imagine you want to develop an app and need to read data from a device. Before starting the project, you first test whether the data can actually be accessed. You do not build the app itself or anything else — you only solve the thing that could break the project. A simple interface that tries to access the data, nothing more. You can even test several routes to the data and decide later which one to use. But unless that specific hard problem is solved, the project does not start.[136]

Not every problem needs to be fully solved beforehand, as long as there is justified confidence that it can be solved. Depending on the project, a preliminary analysis, prototype, or rough draft section may provide a sufficient proof of concept. If experts say it cannot be done, investigate their arguments. Check why they think so and whether your approach bypasses their objections. Experts do not necessarily think of

the same workarounds you do. Blanket statements without argument or evidence — «*Cannot be done*», «*Doesn't work*», or «*Nobody wants that*» — should be treated skeptically. If experts say it **can** be done, you should probably hurry with the implementation, because others may already be on the same track.

If you miss a hard problem and it turns out to be unsolvable — in reasonable time or at all — the kill criteria should trigger and end the project.

Idea Is Not New

Newness is a requirement of creativity. But checking whether an idea is actually new can be highly aversive. People usually do not want to find out that the idea already exists, because that would mean they cannot use their great idea as they imagined it.

Still, you are better off knowing. And if possible, you can build on what you find. You will likely have a different take that can improve the existing idea once you see how others have realized it. You may even beat their solution if you know how it works and go beyond it.

So deliberately setting aside enough time to find out whether the idea is actually new, or asking others to help check, improves the creative work.

Idea Is Not Useful

Usefulness is also a requirement of creativity. A project has to solve a need for a target audience. But that need is hard to assess.

If you are not part of that audience, seeing things from their point of view is difficult, especially because many constraints are invisible unless you analyze the situation or have direct experience with it (cf. Knowledge for Ideas on page 94). If you are part of the audience, the opposite problem

might apply — overgeneralizing from yourself to everyone else. An individual person is rarely representative of a whole group. What works for you may be too complex for others.[137]

Thus, getting an honest assessment of the project's value requires deliberate work and access to the target audience[138] (see Understanding a Situation on page 219 and Value of a Solution on page 222 in Project Evaluation).

This even applies to private projects done solely for oneself, e.g., creating a journal or sewing a piece of clothing. Assessing whether it will actually be useful can be surprisingly hard — many projects seem good at the moment but do not translate to long-term usage.

The value of the idea also has to be preserved during realization, which usually requires repeated check-ins with the target audience (see Project Evaluation on page 209). This kind of feedback helps keep the project on track and prevents it from mutating into something unusable, e.g., through **feature creep**.

Abandonment or Project-Hopping

Projects can be started, worked on, then quickly abandoned when the work becomes difficult or other commitments displace the project work.

These starts and stops are highly aversive[139] and deeply unproductive. Project-hopping in particular leaves little to show for, because projects never move beyond their initial easy stages.

One reason project-hopping is so tempting is that the comparison is unfair. The other project really does look easier, because the hard or tedious part of the current project is being compared with the easy part of the other project. In reality, the other project will likely have its own hard and tedious phases as well. They are just not visible yet because the project has not advanced that far.

One way to deal with this is to create the consequences needed for project work, including kill criteria. Since «*the work is tedious for a while*» or «*the work becomes hard*» is usually not itself a kill criterion, and because the project is bounded by both release and kill criteria, the work continues.[140] And while doing the core project, the ideation in the central projects can satisfy the need for simplicity and play.

Crossing the Rubicon Too Eagerly

Realizing a project requires blocked work time, which should already limit how many projects get started (see also Creative Energy on page 163). Still, it is possible to cross the Rubicon too lightly, too eagerly, and more out of mood or conviction than because real consequences have been created.

In such cases, projects are started and then quickly abandoned when «*life gets in the way*» or «*the mood shifts*». Serial starting and abandoning is usually not just a problem of discipline or willpower. Often it points to a deeper issue. For example: Were the Rubicon Criteria (see page 179) actually applied — especially the personal-fit criteria? And what can be learned from the repeated pattern of starting and abandoning projects?

Hesitating to Start a Project

Whether it takes the form of analysis paralysis or just the question «*What if I make the wrong decision?*», hesitation to start is also common.

A started project will indeed absorb most implementation energy until it is either released or aborted. But it is unlikely to be the first or last project. If you use Wayfinding (see pages 147ff), the project is just one waypoint on a journey guided by aspiration. If the decision was suboptimal, you adjust with the next project. Even if it was a large project, you probably learned a great deal from it.[141]

Once you cross the Rubicon, you cross it with the best project that was available to you at that time. You made the best decision you could with the information you had. And you know in advance that the project will either be realized and released if the release criteria are met, or aborted if the kill criteria are triggered.

That mindset allows you to use your full powers on the project, make it the best it can be, and even enjoy realizing it.

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

Crossing the Rubicon badly as well as not daring to cross at all prevent successful projects (see Table 17).

However, while the argument of this chapter is that starting a project should be taken seriously and made possible by real constraints, sometimes jumping blindly into a project can work as well. In some cases, there is little other choice, e.g., when work or reality confronts you with a creative problem.[142]

But if you have multiple possible projects in your idea collection, then making a deliberate decision about where to concentrate creative energy is both feasible and worthwhile — and it makes it possible to realize even complex projects.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter12

Where it fits into your current creative process:

1. Update your Creative System Map.
2. How many projects are currently being implemented? What is their scope? Their release and kill criteria?

3. Mark whether it constrains output, i.e., is a potential candidate for an Integration Worksheet trial.

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Constraints	not set, daily life crowds out project work	blocking sufficient time and energy for the project	constraints so tight that they strangle flexibility
Scope	unclear, feature creep, no standards preventing quality decline, no release criteria leading to endless «*optimization*», no kill criteria leading to zombie projects	minimum viable project with distinctive value, challenging standards, clear release and kill criteria	too strictly defined, preventing the project from growing and improving during realization; standards so high that release is blocked
Standards, Release and Kill Criteria	not defined, quality usually negotiated downward, high risk of postponed release or zombie projects	clear and high standards, release and kill criteria, but no perfectionism, accountability partner if needed	over-detailed standards, release and kill criteria, not based on real constraints but on a perfect world
Rubicon Criteria	insufficiently checked, leading e.g. to lack of value, undiscovered monkey problems, etc.	checked, but if criteria are unclear or not fulfilled, that is recognized and chosen deliberately	endless analysis and rumination, especially when more than one project could work; avoiding decision; being discouraged when some planning fallacy might actually be useful
Common Failure Modes	hard problems not solved, idea not new or not useful, abandonment or project-hopping	making an informed decision and then enjoying the project work	too many projects, hesitating to start

Table 17: Creative Commitment — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow.

Framework: Projects

> «I never did anything worth doing by accident; nor did any of my inventions come by accident; they came by work.»
>
> *Thomas Alva Edison*

Projects are where ideas stop being possibilities and begin to confront reality. Here, constraints, friction, and sustained work shape them into artifacts — or shatter them. Unlike ideas, projects usually require prolonged effort, craft, and repeated contact with real conditions.

The following three chapters describe that process.

Project Realization is about building the work under real constraints.

Project Evaluation is about arranging contact with reality so the next iteration becomes better informed.

Project Release is about letting the work leave your system and enter the world, where it can have effects you did not design.

In practice, these phases overlap — realization requires repeated evaluation, and release often generates the most valuable feedback for future work.

Chapter 13: Project Realization

«Alright, I'll give it a try.»
«No! Try not. Do ... or do not. There is no try.»
Luke Skywalker and Yoda in «Star Wars V»

Realizing a creative project varies enormously across domains and fields — from creating a bouquet or planning a romantic evening to programming an app, creating a sculpture, writing a book, or doing a PhD thesis.

However, the requirements and failure modes are remarkably similar.

No matter the project, realization is where ideas first encounter conditions they cannot ignore. Something may have been clear and coherent in imagination, or even externalized on paper, but once you realize it, it gets tested. First, by your actual knowledge and skill in implementing it. Reality determines whether it is feasible and works as intended (functionality, domain). Later, it is evaluated by the field (gatekeepers and target audience; see Project Evaluation on page 209).

So, how can project realization be made more successful?

Realization Approaches

Some projects are one-shots. You have an idea, realize it, and whether it works or not, you are done. Other projects are iterative — they are built with the expectation that the first attempt will not be the last.[143] You realize a version, e.g., a mockup, prototype, or a minimum viable project, get feedback, ideally from the target audience, and then develop the next iteration on that basis.

This iterative approach has several advantages. At the outset, the understanding of the situation and of an appropriate solution is necessarily incomplete, especially regarding how the target audience actually behaves and the context in which the artifact will be used.

Each evaluated iteration therefore generates knowledge — it reveals how the solution works in practice and reduces uncertainty. Because learning is built into the process, you do not need to get it right the first time. That would be difficult or impossible in many domains, because the situation is just too complex. Iteration also guards against the «*I know what they really need better than they do*» fallacy by confronting assumptions with actual use.

Working in small, revisable increments keeps the design flexible rather than ossifying into something monolithic and hard to change. It also allows projects to start early and with limited investment — first ideas, then mock-ups, then prototypes, and only later a fully realized work. And it helps prevent feature creep. You know the current version is not the last, so additional features can simply be written down and considered for a later iteration.

There are different names and variants for this approach, often versions of a human-centered design process.[144] It is a planned process that explicitly works through iterations.

At the start of each cycle, you **analyze** the situation: Who uses the current solution, where, when, under which circumstances, and what problems it should solve?

Based on that understanding, you derive **requirements** — aspects the solution must fulfill or avoid. These requirements then guide **possible solutions**, which are evaluated based on how well they fulfill these requirements. This can be done by your own assessment or by using mockups or prototypes to test designs with the target audience.

Depending on the results, you may return to the situation analysis, change the requirements, or develop different solutions. These iterations are used to understand the target audience and the task, and also to uncover which contextual factors actually matter and which dominate. These invisible forces are usually best discovered in practice.

The iterations continue until you have a solution that meets your standards,[145] after which it is often evaluated more broadly.

Although this user-centered design process is usually associated with software development,[146] it can be applied in any domain.

For example, imagine you want to create a truly memorable evening for your partner. You cannot plan it purely from your own idea of what would be «*romantic*», because what matters are the other person's associations, tastes, and expectations. So you explore over time, trying to understand the situation from her perspective — i.e., the target audience and the context. You notice which restaurants she enjoys, try out a drink and observe how it is received, pay attention to whether she prefers quiet places or lively ones, perhaps ask indirect questions or recall past experiences. From these observations, you develop a clearer sense of what would make the evening work and what to avoid — i.e., requirements. You then can iterate and try out different romantic evenings. Small probes that help refine the plan. Gradually, a coherent picture emerges, and you shape the final arrangement based on what you have learned over many evenings rather than on an initial guess. Approaching the event this way increases the likelihood that the evening will actually fit the person it is meant for, because knowledge is built step by step in practice rather than assumed in advance.[147]

Larger creative projects work much the same way. Early versions, sketches, or prototypes are not failed attempts at the

final result, but ways of discovering what the next iteration should be.

Another useful effect is that these intermediate steps are not merely tests, but experiences in their own right. Because they already create value, the process remains worthwhile even when adjustments are still needed. This is a useful attitude in any creative endeavor, where outcomes are uncertain and progress is often indirect.

Thus, a **minimum viable project** is not a reduced version of the work, but a deliberate instrument for learning quickly and with limited investment. Instead of committing extensive resources without feedback and risking getting it wrong, development proceeds together with the target audience.

The users involved in such explorations must, of course, be reasonably representative of the wider audience the project addresses. This is trivial in the example above, but much harder in product development, where feedback often comes mainly from particularly motivated or easily accessible users (see Project Evaluation on page 209).

Project Constraints During Realization

Realization gives ideas form — but which form? Ideally, the constraints were already determined when crossing the Rubicon (see Creative Commitment on page 175). Otherwise, feature creep, mission drift, dilution of standards, and frequent mutations are likely, and the energy just diffuses.

During realization, especially with iterative approaches, form and scope can change. However, the essence of the project should remain stable.[148] This preserves compatibility with both domain and field affordances and makes successful and accepted work more likely. Determining constraints in advance also ensures that later changes in form and scope are deliberate decisions.[149]

For projects that are or may become commercial, issues such as copyright and plagiarism also have to be considered, e.g., regarding texts, images, or fonts.[150] Similarly, release and kill criteria have to be maintained in order to avoid zombie projects.

Long-Term Focused Implementation

The time and energy needed to implement a project must remain available until the project is either realized or aborted. With larger or more complex projects, this can easily mean months or years.

Focusing on one project (see Creative Energy on page 163) ensures that implementation energy is not fragmented across multiple projects. However, environmental constraints are still needed to protect that time and energy from other activities. Otherwise, daily business crowds it out. Ideas start projects — routine finishes them.

Implementation focus is especially vulnerable during emotional dips such as boredom, self-doubt, or bouts of meaninglessness. Usually these pass.[151] Sometimes by pushing through — embracing the suck or simply starting to work for 20 minutes even if you are not in the mood (e.g., time blocking, Pomodoro). You will likely either get into the mood or notice that you do not need the right mood in the first place. Sometimes it helps to remind yourself what you want to achieve — form, scope, meaning — but in general it is better to create environments in which work happens irrespective of mood.

Because the energy is needed over long stretches of time, both intensive work phases, e.g., focused sessions of deep work, and rest phases are necessary. Actual breaks and break days restore the needed energy and keep the mind flexible. Breaks also create distance and make it easier to check whether you are still on the right track. Longer breaks allow

you to look at the work with fresh eyes before committing to continue building on it.[152] Without sufficient breaks and break days, work phases usually become shorter over time, available energy declines, and motivation drops — up to the point where you cannot stand the project anymore because it has become your whole life.[153]

At the same time, a core project usually suffers if breaks last more than a few days. Even if you cannot work on it directly — e.g., while traveling — you can often still do related work, e.g., learning, skill-building, or secretarial work.

You see what works for you in the current project by tracking your progress — output, deep-work phases, milestones, weekly reviews, or similar markers. That allows time-limited trials to see whether your way of working is actually producing the desired results (see also Integration Worksheet).

Craftsmanship

To increase the likelihood of a successful project that is actually useful, knowledge and skill have to be applied deliberately. Your standards (see Standards, Release and Kill Criteria on page 177) combined with the project constraints give you a clear target. Gaps between the idea and reality will still occur, but these are usually craft issues. For example, you know that a scene has to happen in the story, but not yet what it looks like.

Ideally, the work itself holds you accountable by providing clear feedback on whether you are meeting your standards. In some domains the material pushes back directly — wood breaks, colors run into each other, or musical notes sound wrong. In other domains, feedback from others is needed — e.g., whether a text or an app is understandable (see Value of a Solution on page 222).

While standards may seem constraining, they link effort to visible progress, orient you toward something higher (e.g., excellence, beauty), and enable a sense of accomplishment when they are met or exceeded.

In short, they make it possible to celebrate doing good work.

Pragmatic Planning

Your minimum viable project specifies what has to be done to complete it. This allows you to align behavior and environment with the task and to check whether progress is being made.[154]

For complex projects, some kind of plan — e.g., milestones with deadlines — provides orientation and concrete goals to strive for.[155] Such plans keep the work on track while remaining flexible enough to handle unexpected turns during realization. Without them, energy is hard to focus, progress is difficult to see, and confusion is likely. Order first, motion second — the clarity creates momentum.

However, planning and monitoring can also become a trap. Compared to realization, planning often feels safe, and that safety is seductive. It can easily lead to avoidance, overplanning at a level of detail that creative work does not permit, and paralysis.

So planning is just a means to an end — the realized project. Its level and scope have to fit.

Planning usually includes what is needed to make meaningful progress on each workday, e.g., deep-work phases (often best before daily commitments strike), breaks and break days, tools (available? better tools?), and regular workplace preparation (e.g., mise en place,[156] clear to neutral, low distraction). Mentally playing the realization phase through

can make it concrete enough to plan, though the planning fallacy will usually still lead to optimistic planning.[157]

Treating planning like a trial, with regular project reviews to check whether planning and work actually integrated, keeps planning honest and turns it into a design parameter that can be improved. Depending on the situation, the plan may be too optimistic or not challenging enough, and the invested time and effort may have been too little or too much.

Regular Evidence-based Reviews

Long-term projects mutate and drift easily. Sometimes that is desirable — for example, when deeper engagement with the topic and feedback from the target audience lead to better ideas and solutions. Realization is not a straight line, so detours, changes, and setbacks are expected. Other times, however, the changes are just relaxed standards and a slow dilution of craft. In both cases, comparing the work to the Project Constraints During Realization (see page 196) and the Pragmatic Planning (see page 199) helps ensure that the project is developing in the right direction.

Because these changes happen gradually and are hard to notice, regular reviews are needed. Scheduling appointments for such reviews — e.g., every one or two weeks — helps ensure they actually happen.

To base the review on something solid, it helps to document the work. For example, answer the question «*What do I want to achieve today?*» before working, and after working answer «*What did I achieve today?*» and «*What is my assessment of the day?*» One sentence is usually enough. Done routinely, this produces a reliable behavioral trace that can be used to evaluate changes, e.g., via the Integration Worksheet.

If the work slows or other issues appear, regular evidence-based reviews catch them and make adjustment possible. Even better, they make progress visible and allow you to celebrate it deliberately — for example, when a milestone is reached.

Common Failure Modes of Realization

Frequent failure modes when realizing a project are Blocks, Zombie Projects, Lack of Implementation Energy, Mistakes, Fear and Self-Doubt, and Someone Beat You to It. For Abandonment or Project-Hopping see page 186, for too many projects, see Diffused Energy on page 171.

Blocks

If blocks appear during realization and the hard problems were already solved (see Creative Commitment on page 175), they are usually local rather than project-concept problems.

The typical «*writer's block*» or «*artist's block*» is often either a lack of structure (looks too complex, cannot grasp it, no coherent thread), doubt (see Fear and Self-Doubt on page 204), or Lack of Implementation Energy (see page 202). Lack of structure is especially common at the start of projects. The scope feels overwhelming, and you do not know where to begin.

Whatever the cause, structural blocks are not solved by more raw material or more ideas, but by structure — ordering the material, making an outline, or otherwise imposing form. Sometimes the best way to structure a project is to start from the end. You may not know where to begin, but you usually know where you want to end up. From there, the next step often becomes obvious.

Zombie Projects

A project that fails still produces something — experience, clearer judgment, and material you can build on. It also frees you to move on. Some projects, however, neither succeed nor fail. They remain in limbo indefinitely, occupying time and attention while preventing you from doing other work that you could actually complete.

Sometimes the project keeps mutating — feature creep prevents both realization and abortion. In other cases, this limbo is maintained by a toxic mixture of escalating commitment and sunk-cost fallacy, combined with doubts about quality and fear of judgment once the work is exposed. In both cases, the project is neither alive nor abandoned, but quietly blocks everything around it.

In such situations, incremental improvement is often the wrong instinct. What helps is a forced change of conditions, e.g., publish a fragment, impose a hard deadline, or deliberately set the project aside for a defined period. Switching from a one-time release model to iterative development with multiple releases can also help. And sometimes the most productive move is not to untie the knot, but to cut it and move on.[158] Just kill the project and learn from it.

Lack of Implementation Energy

Implementation energy can be insufficient when the core project receives too little of the potentially available energy.

Sometimes this is due to too many competing projects (see Diffused Energy on page 171). But it can also happen because the project has lost its challenge — things have become too easy, merely craft or organizational work — or because there is a misalignment between you and the work.

Loss of challenge can often be pushed through — by trying to exceed your own standards, for example, or through emotional regulation such as listening to music. Misalign-

ment with the work is deeper. It requires hard questions — e.g., «*Do I really want to do this work?*» — and perhaps some coaching. That clarity can be uncomfortable, but both the discomfort and the answers are diagnostic.[159] In some cases, embracing the suck or outsourcing parts of the work may help.

Insufficient energy can also result from spending too much energy elsewhere — generating lots of ideas, other commitments drawing energy away, constant distractions and interruptions — or from burnout because breaks and break days were neglected, especially in decision-heavy phases. In those cases, what is usually needed is protection of the time for realization (e.g., environment changes, constraint planning) and strict adherence to breaks and break days — especially when that is hardest to do.[160]

Mistakes

Mistakes are part of creative work, because nobody has — or at least you have not — done it before. You are just finding out what works and what does not. If you make decisions on the basis of the best information available at the time, you are making defensible mistakes. The mistakes may still look obvious in hindsight, but only in hindsight.

A good way to show this is to give someone else the information you had before making a decision and ask what he would do. That person will usually make the same mistake. It only becomes obvious once one knows it will not work.

Mistakes can be minor and solvable. Usually they only cause delay and may require some focused ideation (see Ideation Types by Project Stage on page 97).

Major errors include gaps and conceptual mistakes — problems that call the feasibility of the whole project into question. These are hard problems or showstoppers that should ideally have been caught before the project started (see

Hard Problems Not Solved on page 184). You may have to pause the project, though there may still be a solution that makes it feasible later. So it can make sense to park the project, return it to the collection, and perhaps reactivate it later. In any case, examine why the hard problem was not spotted earlier.

Over-Commitment

Creative projects can be important. But if everything is directed at one project, life becomes entangled with it. Too much rests on the progress and success of that project — identity, mental health, and meaning.

That kind of focus is a realization-specific risk in long projects. It can permit impressive progress. But setbacks hurt more, and failure can become devastating. It also becomes harder to maintain perspective and humor, both of which are needed for creative solutions. Bertrand Russell put it well: «*One of the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one's work is terribly important.*» Kill criteria then become harder to apply even when necessary, and even release criteria may be ignored for fear of the void left once the project is complete.

So while a strong focus is necessary for progress, it should never be the only focus. Otherwise everything becomes too vulnerable. A single major setback or failure can derail or crash both the project and your life.

Fear and Self-Doubt

During realization, things become real, and that realness can lead to fear and self-doubt, which narrow the mind. Table 18 gives examples and possible counter-perspectives.

In general, thought-based fear is just that — thoughts. Intelligent and creative people are very good at overthinking, and very creative in imagining worst-case scenarios.

Fear/Self-Doubt	Different Perspective
feeling stupid while doing the work	Not surprising. You are doing something that was not done before.[161] Drowning it out with music[162] or simply doing a first version often helps (e.g., a «*shitty first draft*»[163]).
Imposter Syndrome	Feeling like a fraud.[164] Sometimes this comes from a mismatch between preferred ideation modes and what the domain or field expects (see Generating Ideas). Then the result has to be understood and explained through a different mode.
being wrong	Evaluation will show it. Being wrong is not a moral failure if the decisions were made well. It is material for learning. See Mistakes on page 203.
having wasted time and effort	Realizing the project likely increased knowledge and skill. Learn from it.
judged by the finished work	Examine why you expect negative judgment, e.g., unsupportive environment? The useful counter-question to «*What if it is shit?*» is «*What if it is a good idea and you prevent others from using the fruits of your work?*» And even if judgment is negative, think iteratively — if people stopped after the first negative feedback, no one would improve.
pushback by the field	Likely with some topics. Why are you doing this work? Is it important and true? Does it provide meaning? If so, that is part of the price.
thinking the work is «*trivial*», «*obvious*», or «*cringe*»	Expected after long immersion. It is trivial and obvious **to you** under these conditions. Find out what others actually think by evaluating it (Evaluation), then learn from that for future projects. And do not let «*cringe*» be the blocker of dreams — evaluate that, too.
feeling empty once the project is completed	Release the project as well as you can, then look in the idea collection for a new core project — e.g., among central projects — or enjoy a break.
afraid of success (expectations might rise)	Check the role of the environment — is it actually supportive, or merely pressuring? Supportive environments can tolerate natural variation in creative work.

Table 18: Possible Fear and Doubt and Different Perspectives.

However, often that is illusory fear — actual fear is much deeper in the body. See also the supplemental materials.

Someone Beat You to It

Sometimes the solution did not exist when you started, but while you were working on it, someone else did something similar. And they beat you to it.

Parallel creativity is normal. Many people stand on the shoulders of the same giants. Someone else publishes a similar study or book, develops the same app, explores the same theme.

That can be devastating.

But first check whether they actually did the same thing. In some domains, parallel creativity can lead to identical solutions that kill the project outright (e.g., math, patents; see also page 16). In others, the differences can still matter, and the project can be taken in another direction.

Examine where your solution differs and emphasize that difference if the project remains useful. For example, if the competing app uses heavy gamification, perhaps a less gamified app becomes a valuable alternative — or vice versa.

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

Both underflow and overflow are likely during realization — from insufficient planning and energy to over-planning and overcommitment (see Table 19).

Being clear about the project and checking in regularly should keep it on track. It also allows you to focus on the work itself, knowing that problems are likely to be caught early — and that realizing the project can still be fun.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter13

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Realization Approaches	treating every project as a one-shot, learning too late that assumptions were wrong	choosing one-shot or iterative realization to fit the project, target audience, reversibility, and risk	endless iteration, perpetual prototyping, no convergence toward release
Project Constraints	under-defined project, vague goals, difficult to focus on	minimal viable project with distinctive value, used as a standard when changes are made	over-defined project, no flexibility for improvement during realization
Long-Term Focused Implementation	progress too slow, work stalls, demotivation	one core project, other projects only in ideation/structure, side projects if needed, breaks and break days	doing the project to the exclusion of everything else, becoming aversive quickly
Craftsmanship	shoddy work, rushing just to finish	clear standards, excellent work, feedback from work and target group	perfectionism paralyzes the work
Pragmatic Planning	insufficient planning makes course correction and progress checks impossible	milestones and deadlines, right scope/level of detail, regular preparation of the workplace	planning with tasks, milestones, and time estimates so detailed that it no longer fits hard to predict creative work
Regular Evidence-based Reviews	no review means drift goes unnoticed	generating hard evidence through work itself, regular check-ins, adjustment	tracking and reviewing replace the work itself
Common Failure Modes of Realization	Blocks, Zombie Projects, Lack of Energy, Mistakes, Someone Beat You to It	enjoying the work, knowing you have done your best to ensure progress	Fear and Self-Doubt, Over-Commitment bypassing Kill/Release Criteria

Table 19: Project Realization — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow.

Where it fits into your current creative process:

1. Update your Creative System Map.
2. What path has real work followed recently? What did you actually produce? What almost happened but did not?
3. Mark whether it constrains output, i.e., is a potential candidate for an Integration Worksheet trial.

Chapter 14: Project Evaluation

> «The great tragedy of creativity — the breaking of a beautiful artifact on a neglected reality.»[192]
>
> *Daniel Wessel*

During project realization, ideas encounter reality — they collide with constraints. The resistance and friction are the feedback that is needed to improve the artifact. Like a smith's hammer hitting metal or a knife on a whetstone, they shape the ideas and the project into something of value.[165]

That is the main goal of feedback — and of evaluations more specifically — the **improvement of the creative work**.

Thus, an evaluation is not an abstract judgment or casual opinion. It is reality-based feedback that provides the needed friction to shape creative work into something that actually works.

A good evaluation arranges contact with reality so the next decision is better informed. So to improve creative work, the question is: **What conditions make that reality feedback happen sooner, cheaper, and more honestly?**

Willingness to Improve

Few people want negative feedback — feedback that shows that things do not work or are plainly wrong. However, being willing to seek out and engage with such feedback honestly is the only way to improve ideas and projects deliberately. This willingness includes openness, honesty, and humility, which allows people to take feedback seriously — but not personally (see Craft to Create on page 52).

This willingness to improve also preserves momentum when the quality of creative work varies. Many factors influence how good something is — the quality of the ideas, focus, materials, and so on. Sometimes these factors align to create the best conditions, sometimes they misalign and create the worst, and usually they land somewhere in between.[166] There should be overall improvement over time, but occasional flukes are to be expected. We simply do not usually see them in others, because the worst results get improved quietly or remain in R&D labs or artists' studios. The path to successful artifacts therefore runs through many attempts, failures, corrections, and restarts.

It is this **non-defensive contact with reality** — the ability to see what is actually true without immediately protecting your ego, your story, or your habits — that allows for quick course corrections, fast learning, less wasted time on dead strategies, and better investment of your energy where the returns are real.

Note that this is not self-hatred, self-flagellating, or a «*woe is me*» attitude, but accurate observation with low ego interference.[167] From the outside, it may even look humble. In reality, it is an extremely aggressive strategy for improving the work. It makes it possible to say — cleanly and without melodrama — what the real problem is, even if the problem is the own work as it currently stands, and then actually solve it.

Curiosity is very helpful here. For example, in questions such as «*What might I be missing?*» and «*How might I do better?*». It also helps to keep believing in the idea while deliberately looking for misconceptions, issues, and limitations.[168]

While feedback can point to a lack of knowledge or skill, it is directed at the work, not at identity. Success takes time, and criticism keeps things alive and makes them better. Given how much successful creative work and personal improvement depend on feedback, the worst thing that can happen is

not getting any. Even harsh and valid — but not abusive — feedback means that the other person believes you can do better.[169]

Resistance Criteria

Creative work improves only when it meets resistance, when there is friction and pushback. That resistance can come from your own view of what the project should be and from your standards for how it should be realized (see Standards, Release and Kill Criteria on page 177). It can also come from the work itself — wood splintering, code not compiling. Or it can come from others, for example, feedback from the field or the target audience, who ultimately decide whether something is creative. Usually, during realization, the criteria shift from one's own standards toward field or target-audience feedback.

Without some criteria — explicit or implicit — there is nothing for the work to push against. Everything remains equally acceptable, which means nothing can be meaningfully revised. Thus, these criteria are not abstract ideals, but tools that generate usable feedback. They make the gap between your current work and what you want to achieve visible, and therefore workable.

In practice, you can use criteria that allow you to ask:

- Does this version solve the problem better than the previous one?
- Where does it work or fail under real use?
- What specifically needs to change next?

The answers guide the iteration. You can also evaluate the resistance criteria themselves by how well they guide these iterations. As they are feedback instruments, not moral obligations, they need to be calibrated to generate movement, not abstract judgment. If they prevent you from producing work,

they are too rigid. If they never force revision, they are too weak.

In many domains, these criteria — especially one's own standards — improve with experience. Learning what is good, what counts as quality, even developing taste, is part of learning a domain. This is very obvious in domains such as music, where well-played versus misplayed notes provide immediate feedback, but it happens in every domain.

Repeated Reality Contact

In creative work, **evaluation is a series of contacts with reality during the realization of an idea**. Thus, an iterative approach with repeated reality contact is usually best suited to improving the work (see Realization Approaches on page 193).

These iterations can happen at the level of an idea, in an Internal Simulation or External Representation (e.g., a sketch or a draft), then become more concrete in a prototype, or even take the form of different versions of a realized and released project (e.g., apps, books, or painting series).[170]

Each evaluated iteration generates knowledge that guides the next one by reducing uncertainty. It allows you to find out what is already happening, where the friction is, to try adjustments, and to see whether they improve the situation.

Feedback is most useful when it arrives early enough to influence direction and concretely enough to suggest change. The further along the work is, the easier it becomes to get accurate data, because the artifact is more concrete. But the cost of change also rises, because more has been invested — resources, time, and ego. The worst case is feedback at the end of development that calls the whole idea into question.

Timing of Evaluations

Evaluations can focus on different aspects of feedback:

- **Exploratory Feedback** («*Ex-Ante⌣ Evaluation*» or «*Preliminary Analysis*»): Feedback while shaping the idea, usually before the implementation is started. The focus is on understanding the target audience and the problem — the situation, the requirements, the design space. See Understanding a Situation on page 219.
- **Directional Feedback** («*Formative⌣ Evaluation*»): Feedback during realization, once the work begins to take form. It is used to shape possible solutions — to decide what to pursue, drop, or adjust. This is often done after each iteration. A few people (5–10) are usually enough to spot major issues, especially if members of the target audience can interact with mockups or prototypes.[171]
- **Validation Feedback** («*Summative⌣ Evaluation*»): Validation feedback examines whether a near-finished or finished project actually works in real use — or «*in the⌣ wild*». It is less about exploring possibilities and more about checking whether the work holds up under real conditions. Because it usually involves more people, it requires methods that scale easily, e.g., survey questions rather than direct observation.
- **Project Work Feedback** («*Post-Mortem*»): Feedback that moves from the particular project to future ones. The work on that project is examined from the initial idea to the period after release. What can be learned for future projects? What actionable feedback should be integrated?
- **Continuous Feedback** («*Continuous Monitoring*»): Feedback generated continuously by the project itself, e.g., user feedback, usage numbers, visitor numbers, and so on. If possible, it also comes from the developers themselves if they are part of the target audience («*Eat your own dogfood*»[172]).

While early feedback is easier to integrate and comes with lower change costs, early ideas are also fragile. With little invested in them, they can be dropped too easily, even if they are good, simply because the feedback was too hard.[173] So at the very least, the idea should be robust enough to survive contact with reality and withstand criticism. For example, by first exploring it before seeking feedback, looking for likely criticism, knowing its strengths, or being willing to defend it.

Feedback is worse than useless if it destroys the idea it is supposed to improve.

Exposing ideas and projects to feedback prevents you from continuing in a vacuum — without it, projects drift and usefulness is likely to decline. But with too much feedback, solutions never settle. The aim is to introduce feedback where it changes decisions, not where it merely produces opinions.

Valid Feedback

To actually improve ideas, projects, or future work, the feedback needs to be valid. However, getting valid feedback is surprisingly difficult. Even one's own judgment of the work can switch quickly between «*This is shit*» and «*This is the shit*».

Relevant Factors in General

For some projects, especially in science and engineering, the standards are high. Measurements must be objective, reliable, and valid — and these are only the main quality criteria. There are other criteria as well. Things become even more complicated when causal effects are involved, for example whether an artifact does actually cause a certain improvement, such as a fitness app leading to more exercise and a fitter body. Working at that level requires training in methodology and statistics.[174]

However, in many cases, being directionally correct is a sufficient standard. The question is not «*Is that true⌣?*» but «*Does this change⌣ improve⌣ my output enough to keep it?*»[175]

Factors that influence this criterion are:

- **Understanding:** The idea or project, as well as the goal of the feedback, have to be understood. Ideas are usually rich in one's own mind, but others need an externalized version in order to respond to them. Thus, it is usually a good idea to externalize them well, e.g., with an annotated sketch or a pre-planned elevator pitch. Then provide information about the goal of the work, the audience, what you have done, and what you plan to do.
- **Source of the Feedback:** In general, the closer the source is to the field or the target audience, the more likely the feedback is valid.[176] Expert opinion can be badly wrong — in both directions. Experts can argue that something that works is impossible (e.g., heavier-than-air flight), while entrepreneurs fail with ideas that «*should have⌣ worked*».
- **Representativeness:** Target audiences are rarely homogeneous, so good representation matters (e.g., novice vs. expert users). Mind-reading is usually far off («*It would be⌣ useful for that group that I do not belong to.*»). Better ask representatives of that group directly.
- **Realistic Circumstances:** The greater the gap between the evaluation situation and later actual use, the less trustworthy the feedback is. For example, if users first receive an explanation but will not get one when the artifact is in the store, the feedback will likely be off. Artifacts are best evaluated under realistic conditions, e.g., people can look at them, try them out, and interact with them. This does not mean the artifact has to be finished — only that it should look and act finished enough (e.g., mockup, prototype, or Wizard-of-Oz).

- **Want vs. Need:** The target audience can often say accurately what they want, e.g., an easier communication app. But they usually lack the expert knowledge to say what they actually need, e.g., not a better-designed app but a workflow that makes much of the communication unnecessary. Sometimes they may even hesitate to state what they want, because it is awkward — for example, a professional not wanting to admit that he needs more support in doing a task.[177] Thus, stated needs require interpretation, and possible solutions have to be evaluated in practice.[178]
- **Watching Out for Biases:** Irrelevant aspects easily distort feedback. For example, we look for confirming information (confirmation bias), are more invested in things we made ourselves (IKEA effect), cool new things often produce highly positive short-term reactions that do not survive long-term use (newness effect), people try to be nice when giving feedback even though «*nice*» is neither good nor useful (demand characteristics), and people behave differently when they know they are being observed (Hawthorne effect). These possible biases do not make feedback useless — that would be another bias (fallacy fallacy) — only that feedback should be treated skeptically.
- **Checking for Side Effects, Second-Order Effects, Long-Term Effects, and Non-Events:** Because an artifact changes a system — your life and other people's lives — it can have side effects and long-term effects. First-order effects are the direct, intended outcomes. Second-order risks are indirect consequences created by the existence or use of what was made. They are often delayed, non-linear, and outside your control. For example, the artifact may shift attention or behavior, destabilize a system, create dependency, or provoke similar and escalating reactions.[179] These effects are often missed unless they are deliberately checked for. Similarly, noticing what did *not* happen, but

should have happened, requires deliberate attention, because non-events do not draw attention.

There are many different ways to get feedback. For example, you can ask questions (surveys, interviews) or observe behavior.[180] Questions are usually the easiest way to get feedback. Behavior is often more revealing and harder to fake than words.[181] However, observing behavior is harder, because we easily interpret it in ways that are biased by our expectations.[182] Combining different methods can compensate for their respective weaknesses.[183]

Feedback from a Single Source

Feedback can provide useful insights even if it comes from a single source, e.g., one person or a single AI counsel. However, there are strong constraints if it is from a single source:

- **Grain of Salt:** It is only *one* perspective. The target audience is usually broader, and the source is unlikely to represent the full variance. Even experts are often wrong.
- **Check Understanding:** To verify understanding, the counsel should first summarize the idea or artifact, then point out positive aspects, then aspects to improve, and then possible next steps. If you need social support, ask for that explicitly. You can also test people's ability to spot and communicate errors honestly by deliberately inserting an error and seeing whether they mention it.
- **Different Perspective:** The person should bring a different perspective (actual viewpoint diversity) and provide arguments and evidence. You need someone willing to tell you if your baby is ugly or weak — and, ideally, where to apply the scalpel or how to train it. In other words, the person should be good, not nice. That is a demanding standard and usually requires someone other than an easily available friend or acquaintance. It must also be someone whose advice you are actually willing to take.

- **Wants You to Become Better:** Counsel should first try to understand the work, then criticize it. They should want it to become better, and provide actionable feedback in a way that keeps the receiver open to it. At its best, this is honesty that turns the situation into something positive. Because feedback usually contains negative information, it should be given in private. Public feedback usually only produces defensiveness.
- **Counsel or Co-Creator:** Feedback differs in how strongly it shapes the work. Instrumental help points out strengths and flaws, but leaves you to develop the solution yourself. That lets you become competent and retain ownership. Executive help means someone doing part of the work for you, which can easily drift into co-creation. It helps to decide beforehand what role you want.
- **Ethics:** Only ask for feedback if you are at least willing and able to use it, because otherwise you are wasting that person's time and goodwill.
- **Kind of Feedback:** Be explicit about the kind of feedback you want. For example, whether you want the idea itself challenged, the implementation criticized, or specific criteria such as originality, understandability, or impact assessed. If you do not get useful feedback, check whether it is the right audience, whether the idea is clearly presented, and whether you need to provide concrete entry points («*I am interested to know whether …*»).

Evaluation Targets

The goal of feedback is always to improve the work. Two main targets are understanding a situation in order to come up with suiting solutions and assessing the value of a solution. Not every project needs all of these tools. More expressive domains often use looser but still reality-bound forms of evaluation.

Understanding a Situation

Situations can be quite complex, so the following questions help ensure that the main aspects are covered. Not all of them will be relevant for every project. Answers can come from the target group itself (e.g., surveys, interviews, behavior observations), but also from prior work, literature, and other sources.

- **Target Audience:** Who are the relevant groups and actors? What are their characteristics, goals, capabilities, and constraints (e.g., interests, technical skills, or financial situation)? Are there subgroups (e.g., novices vs. experts)? Who will use this directly? Who is affected indirectly?
- **Tasks:** What does the target audience actually do or have to do, step by step, including the workarounds they use? What decisions are made? Where do errors occur? What is frequent, rare, stressful, or interruptible? The answers reveal where to simplify, automate, or support judgment.
- **Problems, Needs, Pain Points:** What is wrong with the current state? Is a design intervention appropriate? What is the actual problem — not the requested feature? What people *want* may not be what they *need*. Who experiences the problem, and how severely?
- **Goal and Outcome Analysis:** What does «*success*» mean for the target audience? What changes if the solution works? What behaviors should become easier, faster, safer, or more meaningful?
- **Workflow/System:** How do tasks, actors, tools, and information interact across a broader system? What happens before and after the interaction?
- **Competition:** How is the problem already addressed, e.g., through tools, habits, or substitutes? What do users do today instead? Which behaviors would have to change?

This includes the status quo, the current behavior including doing nothing, which is often a powerful competitor.

- **Constraints:** Which non-negotiable limits shape the design space? What cannot change, e.g., technical, legal, cultural, or financial constraints? What are the hard versus soft constraints?
- **Risks:** What could go wrong when another solution is used? What would the consequences be? Which errors and misuses must be avoided, and which safety nets are needed?
- **Adoption/Change:** Would another solution be accepted by the target audience? Which learning curve is acceptable? Where are the likely resistance points, e.g., training demand or low perceived benefit?

As with organizing creativity itself, context usually has a strong influence on possible solutions.

Context while Interacting

- **Physical:** What is the material environment in which the solution is used? Lighting, noise, temperature, or movement conditions? Which objects compete for space? For example, a tablet on a construction site has to tolerate dirt and drops, whereas in an office it does not.
- **Temporal:** What is the time structure around the activity? Time pressure, frequency of use, continuous use or interruptions, or seasonal use? How long can attention be sustained? For example, emergency workflows where seconds matter versus rarely used software that needs stronger guidance.
- **Social:** What are the roles, expectations, and presence of other people? Is the use individual, collaborative, or supervised? What about visibility, privacy, or authority? For example, a personal mental health app (avoiding embar-

rassment) versus a shared editor (awareness of others crucial).

- **Technical:** What is the surrounding technological ecosystem? Which systems, devices, and infrastructure coexist? For example, office software has to fit into complex infrastructure, while outdoor navigation has to work remotely.

Shaping the Context

- **Organization:** What are the structures, incentives, and constraints? What does the organization actually reward, measure, or forbid? Who owns errors? Who approves changes? For example, a home app versus an organizational workflow app aligned with KPIs.[184]
- **Culture:** What are the shared meanings, habits, and expectations? What assumptions exist about authority, risk, meanings, or metaphors? For example, using baseball metaphors outside the US.
- **Economic:** What cost structures and value perceptions affect adoption and use? Who pays versus who benefits? What is considered worth the effort? For example, a billing tool may save time but increase transparency, so users resist it.
- **Legal:** What is allowed, recorded, or validated? Which documentation or liability standards apply? For example, a public-administration app conflicting with data-protection requirements.
- **Lifecycle:** What happens across the product's lifespan? Maintenance, repair, disposal, or environmental consequences? What happens after deployment? For example, products may be installed in the field but impossible to update there.
- **Cognitive/Emotional:** What is the user's mental state, stress, motivation, or confidence? Is he anxious, bored, overloaded, or confident? Is the task perceived as meaning-

ful or imposed? For example, software used for exploration or play versus software for serious, low-error-tolerance work.

Whenever you try to understand a situation in order to create a solution, you are diagnosing motivations, frictions, risks, and behavioral change. It does not matter whether the project is product development, writing a thesis, organizing a workshop, or planning a romantic evening.

If the situation is misunderstood, the creative solution will likely mismatch the conditions of reality or the motives of the people inside it. For example, that romantic evening has social and cultural constraints. If those are ignored, the evening may be technically excellent but emotionally tone-deaf.

Value of a Solution

A more complete understanding of the situation allows for better ideas. But the only way to test whether that understanding actually translated into better solutions is by evaluating them. **Does the specific solution actually have value for the target audience?**

Depending on the artifact, what makes it valuable can vary. Usually, some version of **usability** (effectiveness, efficiency, learnability), **user experience** (satisfaction), and **acceptance** can be applied. These criteria are especially useful for artifacts that are directly used. In other domains, analogous criteria apply.

- **Effectiveness:** Does it achieve the goal? For example, if you want to convey knowledge in a blog post, is the reader able to act on that knowledge correctly? Or if you want to evoke a particular sensation with a painting or poem, does it actually have that effect?
- **Efficiency:** How much effort is needed to achieve the goal? For example, if you develop an app, can it be used

quickly and without errors? In a text, can a reader access what you want to convey quickly?

- **Learnability:** Is it easy to learn how to use it? This matters especially when no similar artifacts exist yet. For example, you introduce a new navigation concept in an app.
- **Satisfaction:** Do people enjoy using it? Does it feel right? Function is crucial and usually best developed first, but form also matters. Style and substance are connected.[185] Beauty matters as well[186] — it has power and compels beyond rationality.[187] This also applies to work that deals with negative aspects of life. Depending on how it is done and in what context, people may be willing or even glad to experience negative emotion (e.g., sad-film paradox).
- **Acceptance:** Is the target audience willing to use it? A strong indicator is whether they are also willing to pay for it. Payment may be made in money, time, effort, or some other costly currency («*value͡ for value͡*»). Acceptance can be easily distorted by early enthusiasm. But that «*wow*» or «*newness effect*» might not survive long-term use and thus requires long-term evaluation.[188]

These aspects can be assessed through questions and through behavioral indicators, e.g., how people use the artifact, how often, whether they reach their goal, make errors, improve quickly, enjoy it, recommend it, or pay for it.

Besides these specific aspects, the following general feedback questions often produce useful insights:

1. «*What is good and should be͡ kept?*»
2. «*What could be͡ improved?*»
3. «*What am I not seeing here͡?*»
4. «*If you were͡ me͡, which questions would you ask?*»
5. «*Anything else͡ that might be͡ relevant that I did not ask, should have͡ asked, or that you want to bring up?*»

Assessing the value of a solution becomes easier with experience. In that sense, these evaluations are themselves iterative and improve with feedback.

Dealing with Feedback

Whether feedback comes from a counsel or from a formal evaluation, the question is the same: **How do you use it to improve the work?**

- **Understanding First:** When you get feedback, listen first. Do not defend the idea, even though that will be hard. It is your idea, so of course you are protective of it. Ask questions instead of making assertions. If something was misunderstood, that is valuable feedback, because it tells you that you need to present the idea more clearly next time.
- **Acknowledge the Emotions:** Feedback can feel uplifting or soul-crushing — both are biases. The first step is usually to acknowledge the emotion. Pride and happiness, doubt and anger, all show that you care about the work. And as for negative feedback, even harsh criticism at least shows that more is expected. Only indifference is deadly.[189]
- **Interpretation before Implementation:** Feedback should rarely be implemented exactly as given. Otherwise, because tastes differ and goal conflicts are common, you risk oscillating between incompatible versions of the artifact. Instead, look at the overall pattern and decide what the feedback means for the next iteration.
- **Relevance of Feedback:** Mine the feedback for what is useful for the current and future work. The most important feedback concerns **showstoppers** — things that do not work or threaten the idea or artifact itself. That includes people not understanding the idea, the solution not working, or the artifact having no value to the audience. Unless these are outliers or come from people outside the target audience, they have to be addressed.

Beyond «*showstoppers*», differentiate by **importance** — «*high priority*», «*important but not critical*», «*only if there‿is time‿*», and «*nice‿to have‿*». If everything is important, nothing is.

- **Drain the Poison:** Feedback ranges from honest criticism that wants the work to improve, to positive or negative mindless comments, to trolling that just wants an emotional reaction. Some people are very good at spotting critical issues but bad at phrasing them. Then the information has to be separated from the style. As harsh feedback is aversive to read, you can use a filter, e.g., a friend, colleague, or an AI, to remove the emotional tone and focus on the usable content. It can also reduce interpretative feedback and foreground operational feedback.
- **Weight of Feedback:** Some feedback consists of assertions without argument or evidence. Such comments gain weight if other people make them too. Some comments are just matters of taste, which are less relevant unless they prevent use by the target audience. Squelchers are vague assertions that can be thrown at almost any idea («*We‿ve‿done‿fine‿without‿it*» or «*We‿ve‿always‿done‿it‿this‿way*»). These usually express a personal or organizational dislike of change. In that case, the feedback is less about the idea itself and more about likely resistance to adoption.
- **Only Suggestion for Improvement:** Feedback is always an approach to truth, shaped by the questions, methods, and conditions behind it. Feedback can be wrong, and you can always find something — good or bad. Unless it identifies a showstopper, feedback is a suggestion for improvement, not a final verdict. Also note that people are far more likely to criticize something negatively than positively, and negative feedback tends to linger longer.

Common Failure Modes of Evaluation

Common failure modes in evaluation are Analysis Paralysis, Tainted Identity, Self-Deception, Using Feedback for Other Purposes, and Not Achieving Standards.

Analysis Paralysis

It is easy to get lost in evaluation — you can always ask more people, ask different questions, change things slightly, and evaluate again. But the value of evaluation lies in informing the next step — and that step is meant to lead toward eventual release.

At some point, evaluation also has to be done by the field, outside your control (see Chapter 15: Project Release on pages 231ff), because that is where the most valuable feedback ultimately comes from.

Tainted Identity

A creative project should be important and meaningful. But identity issues can easily confuse feedback.

- **Merged Identity:** When creators identify themselves with their work, objectivity is lost («*I am my work.*»). Because the project and the person become one, even well-formulated feedback to the work feels like an attack on the person. That makes improving the project unlikely and often ruins the journey as well. So while the work should be taken seriously, some distance from one's identity is necessary. The work is just one step in a longer creative path. Seen this way, even a misstep is still just that — something to correct and improve over time.
- **Identity Contamination:** Feedback can also spill over and begin shaping identity («*Other people's reactions to my work define who I think I am.*»). Interpretative feedback risks contaminating identity, e.g., opinions, meanings,

reactions, or identity-shaping narratives («*People love you!*», «*You disappointed fans!*»). The work turns into a judgment on who you are. No feedback should be allowed to do that, because identity rests on more than any one artifact. Operational feedback is safer, more objective, and more useful for shaping the quality of the work rather than the identity of the creator, e.g., download numbers, sales, visitor numbers, or usage patterns.

Self-Deception

Capable, creative people are also capable of sophisticated self-deception. They are just very good at using their intelligence and creativity against reality.

Because friction with reality can force change, or even break an idea or project, some people delay reality contact. They continue developing the work without correction, which increases doubt and fear, which further delays reality contact, and so on. The longer the delay, the more the work drifts away from something potentially useful, and the more painful and costly it becomes to change later.[190]

Similarly, evaluations can be biased to produce only positive feedback — by asking the wrong questions, asking the wrong people, or creating unrealistic conditions. The result is positive feedback during development and failure upon release. That failure is then usually rationalized away, because it was «*unexpected*» the person «*couldn't have known*», or worse, «*the target group is at fault*».[191]

All these biases do is prevent the project from becoming better and more valuable to the target audience. A special case is when people assume that their ideas or projects are *worse* than they actually are. This is often untested or tested only under heavily biased conditions, such as asking people who find flaws in everything. The consequence is that they deny themselves and others a potentially strong project.

Using Feedback for Other Purposes

Feedback is decision input. Its purpose is to improve current and future work.

However, some people want to use feedback for social validation or psychological comfort. These may be legitimate needs, but mixing them with feedback destroys its value.

A strict separation between decision input and social support — ideally through different people — keeps both intact and lets each serve its function cleanly.

Not Achieving Standards

Evaluation shows whether standards were met, missed, or exceeded. That alone is useful information, because it allows you to diagnose why and adapt the craft or the standards later.

The kind of standards matters if discouragement is to be avoided. As a beginner, it makes little sense to compare yourself with mastery — the distance is too great and mastery will look unreachable. A more useful comparison is with your own earlier performance, oriented toward improvement and toward the standards of the domain. That helps you see progress without becoming discouraged.

Social comparison is only necessary if you want to work professionally. Then the question becomes: «*Are you good enough relative to the competition?*» But depending on the target audience, that may not matter. If you create for family and friends, then *their* standards and tastes are what count.

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

Both underflow and overflow can happen easily in evaluation — from avoiding contact with reality to getting lost in too much evaluation data (Table 20).

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Willingness to Improve	seeing success and failure as judgment on the person	evaluation results show what is needed to grow and improve	staying in a creative endeavor with little chance of improvement
Resistance Criteria	vague criteria, no clear indication of progress or what to change	clear criteria and standards that guide iterations	overly specific criteria that do not fit the work
Repeated Reality Contact	avoiding reality contact to «*protect*» ideas or the project, drifting away from usefulness over time	evaluations before, during, and after realization, so the project develops in the right direction	evaluation so frequent that solutions do not stabilize and growth phases disappear
Valid Feedback	no or low-quality criteria, lots of noise, weak decision support	useful, directionally correct feedback, with awareness of its limits	discounting useful feedback due to too high truth standards
Understanding a Situation	stereotypes, unchecked assumptions, overconfidence	realistic understanding; looking at what is happening	getting lost in analysis, refusal to generalize at all
Value of a Solution	assuming value, confusing «*nice to have*» with «*valuable*»	clear criteria for what the work should achieve, cleanly evaluated	perfectionism, not allowing the artifact to stand on its own
Feedback from a Single Source	using whoever is convenient rather than useful, following counsel uncritically	deliberately choosing a source that can give actionable feedback	discounting well-argued input, impossible standards, too much weight
Dealing with Feedback	using only convenient feedback	openness to feedback and deliberate decisions	conflicting feedback without integration or prioritization
Common Failure Modes of Evaluation	Self-Deception, Using Feedback for Other Purposes, ignoring feedback	using evaluation as decision support for improving the work	Analysis Paralysis, Tainted Identity, Not Achieving Standards

Table 20: Project Evaluation — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow.

Evaluations are how creative projects maintain contact with reality and develop in the right direction.

Done well, they keep the work on track.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter14

Where it fits into your current creative process:

1. Update your Creative System Map.
2. Mark whether it constrains output, i.e., is a potential candidate for an Integration Worksheet trial.

Chapter 15: Project Release

> «Writing a book is an adventure. To begin with it is a toy and an amusement. Then it becomes a mistress, then it becomes a master, then it becomes a tyrant. The last phase is that just as you are about to be reconciled to your servitude, you kill the monster and fling him to the public.»
>
> *Winston Churchill*

When you create something, releasing it is usually the final step. The artifact leaves your direct control and your creative system, and confronts real conditions. Its long-term use under actual conditions is usually unknown. Release shows what the artifact actually does, not what you imagined it doing. That can be deeply rewarding if users find creative uses for it, or frustrating if it fails or is misused.

This makes release the final interface between the creative system and the world — and the last real evaluation setting. Only released work can generate consequences you did not design. These effects can then be assessed, for example for an improved version or for future work (see Timing of Evaluations on page 213).

Lack of knowledge can make a release difficult — platform mechanics, formatting, packaging, timing, permissions, or distribution channels all have to be navigated competently. But while Audience Compatibility (see page 233) can always be improved, the main barriers are often loss of control, finality (e.g., the Internet never forgets), exposure, tedious administrative steps, or insecurity about when the artifact is ready.

Many creative systems are very good at producing material, but very bad at releasing it. A project that is never released remains part of your internal workflow rather than your creative output. It accumulates like unprocessed inventory in a warehouse. It is psychologically heavy because the creative

process remains open, it cannot generate feedback, use, or consequences, it provides no insight into how the work fares in real contexts, and it blocks attention for future work. In short, it can clog the system (see System Drag on page 28).

This raises the question of why systems stall at the export boundary and under what conditions the work actually leaves the system.

Willingness to Let Go

Release is the point at which the work stops being under your control and becomes an external object that is used independently of you. The final step is not declaring the work finished, but actually allowing it to leave your control and enter use.

And relinquishing that control over «*your baby*» can be very hard.

People usually invest a great deal of effort into a creative project, so they can become protective or even possessive of what they have created. Loss of control and the finality of release can become barriers. But only when exposed to reality outside your protection can the work actually be assessed — whether it is new and useful. Did this artifact actually do anything, and did it have real impact?

Release Criteria

The release criteria, which should be determined when deciding to realize a project, turn release into a structural step, a workflow transition (see Creative Commitment on page 175).

Without them, thoughts such as «*Is the idea good enough?*» or «*Am I ready?*» can delay release indefinitely, because any artifact can always be improved. And whether one is ready is something one sees in behavior when facing a

situation, not beforehand. So do not cheat yourself out of having an impact.

Because the release criteria were usually set long before realization, they are less biased by the fears that arise immediately before release. Adhering to them allows release when the criteria are met, regardless of attachment or last-minute concerns. No negotiation, just trusting your past self and fulfilling what you decided when fear was not yet on the horizon.

Thus, the release criteria answer the question: «*What must be true for this to become valuable — new and useful — for someone else?*» For example, it is understandable, accessible, and complete enough to function. Once that status has been reached, it has value for others and is released. This also allows for better work, because you can always create an improved version once you have seen how the artifact fares in real contexts. It also protects quality, because bad work does not fulfill the release criteria and thus is not released. Otherwise, your good work will drown in the noise of bad projects.

Audience Compatibility

When your artifact leaves your system and enters the outside world, the form of that transition matters. Domains and fields have expectations regarding how something is released, and a smooth transition makes it more likely that the work is judged correctly and accepted.

The crucial issue is whether the artifact is seen as valuable by the target audience — usually not directly in monetary terms, but in the sense that it fulfills a need they have and makes that value clearly recognizable. Since that was likely one of the main reasons the project was selected for realization in the first place (see Creative Commitment on page 175), the value should already be there. **But it must also become visible to the right people.**

This requires matching the work to the context in which it can function. That matching is something you can observe, test, and learn through repeated releases in order to find what works for you and for the audience.

Part of that knowledge develops once you learn a domain: Where are these people, how do they communicate, what do they find remarkable, and how do they determine value? The principles are the same whether the artifact is a scientific paper that has to meet publication standards or an invitation to your partner for a romantic evening. Much depends on the right place, the right people, the right time, and the right form.

This matching applies not only to the value of the artifact, but also to whether the audience can accept it. Thus it depends both on the quality of the work and on whether it fits the conceptual framework of the audience. For example, if it directly threatens identity or moral self-understanding, acceptance becomes less likely.

A simplified example of audience compatibility is the different reactions to, at the time, controversial scientific findings. In essence, both Ignaz Semmelweis and William Harvey challenged orthodoxy,[193] and both were right. Semmelweis found a way to reduce childbed-fever mortality in mothers from about 10% to 1%. But he shamed colleagues and called them murderers for ignoring evidence. That he was right did not help his case. Harvey, in contrast, adapted his findings to the audience, kept his integrity *and* had impact. While the world should work on evidence and argument, that is not the world we live in. Neglecting this makes even potentially high-impact ideas inconsequential.

Some artifacts require spread within the target audience in order to have impact. That means you may need opinion leaders, promoters, and even interpreters. But the question remains the same: **What do these people see as valuable?**

That may differ from the concrete value of the artifact itself. For example, opinion leaders may be interested in maintaining or expanding their social position, and the artifact may be a means to that end.

In some cases, achieving audience compatibility requires translation. For example, you could tell the non-technical CEO of your company, in engineering terms, that you found a way to produce a central component with a new process involving methods x, y, and z, using the recent technical developments h, g, and even a touch of i, greatly reducing the waste of materials A, B, and C, conserving xyz watts per unit, and cutting production time per unit by 32%.

Or you could look at the issue from his perspective and say: «*We've found a better way to produce a key component — less waste, lower energy consumption, and 32% faster production per unit. If approved for implementation, it could translate directly into lower costs, higher output, and stronger margins.*»

The second version works as an elevator pitch. It is clear, simple, and obviously valuable to him.

Archiving Released Work

Archiving preserves access to created artifacts, their release history, and post-release signals, so future work can learn from them. It also reminds you of the work you have done, which can provide remembrance, motivation, inspiration, and a portfolio to show others. This even applies to a private archive of failed or aborted projects, because mistakes provide lessons that cannot be learned from successes.

Thus, archiving is long-term retrieval infrastructure. It is to released work what collecting is to ideas. So the same criteria as for collecting ideas apply, whether you use a ring binder, a digital tool, or something else. Given the amount of

invested work and the long time frames involved, usability, backups, and future-proof access (e.g., no data island) are crucial. An easy overview, such as a project list, usually helps to see the big picture.

Almost any creative project can be archived in some form. You can photograph artifacts, turn presentation slides into a poster, or simply take a photo of yourself giving a presentation, doing stand-up, or performing improv. Even an ephemeral event that left no traces still leaves memories that can be written down in a short entry. See Preserving the Essence of the Ideas on page 116 for capturing the emotional quality of an event.

Include whatever helps your future self make sense of the project. For example, a copy of the artifact, meta-information (goal, date, reminders on procedure or materials, evaluations), idea history, release history, feedback and reviews, or personal comments. Operational feedback works to inform future work and avoids the identity contamination of interpretative feedback (see Tainted Identity on page 226).

It is also possible to create a private exhibition with copies of your work. Because creative output and quality fluctuate, this can help you keep perspective when the work dips. However, visible artifacts have affordances and can intrude on current work (see Environment on page 63), so such exhibitions usually work better outside the work area.

Common Failure Modes of Releasing

Common failure modes are Last Steps Mistakes, (Fear of) Public Criticism or Pushback, and Confusing Release with Marketing or Sales.

Last Steps Mistakes

The creative work is done, the artifact is ready to be released, and the final steps are often more administrative than craft-based. For example, uploading a book or article to a platform or filling out forms.

In that state of «*the⌣ hard work is finished*», mistakes become very likely. Even dedicated artists and authors can fail on the last steps, especially if they switch directly from deep creative work into release mode. Unless time is tight, taking a break or doing the release the next day, restores enough concentration not to sink one's own work after it is finished.

(Fear of) Public Criticism or Pushback

Internal evaluation can point out flaws, which you can still correct in private. But once the work is public, it cannot be taken back. Even after prior evaluations, its use and the reactions to it may differ from what you expected. People may misuse it. It may trigger negative feedback if people are disappointed, envy if it succeeds («*garage⌣ band effect*»), or attacks by small but loud groups. Or perhaps worse, it may simply be ignored.

Because you usually control the time and form of release, there are ways to reduce this risk. For example, use evaluations to reduce uncertainty, release the work first among friends, family, or other supporters, release in stages or anonymously, or secure public support in advance (e.g., Darwin had Huxley as his «*bulldog*»).

In cases of strong pushback, identifying the source and the reason is crucial. In many visible cases, the pressure does not come from your target audience, but from a small, organized group.[194] They usually have interests that differ from those of your target audience — e.g., social or political influence, identity preservation, or the need to appear moral. These groups can generate disproportionate apparent consen-

sus, especially online. Some are skilled at reframing the situation so that the target feels at fault and becomes reactive or apologetic, especially because the need to be seen as good is strong in most people. And an apology is often blood in the water for such bullies.[195] In many cases, standing by your actual target audience and rejecting that meddling leads to better outcomes for you and for those who are actually interested in your work.[196]

Confusing Release with Marketing, Advertising, or Sales

Release is making the project available («*Here⌣ it is.*»). Distribution is making sure the target group has access to it («*This might be⌣ something of interest to you.*»). Promotion is actively campaigning for it to be used (e.g., marketing, advertising, sales, «*Use⌣ this.*», often including «*Buy this.*»).

Some people sabotage the success of their own work by not releasing it or by downplaying it, because they confuse release, distribution, and promotion. They think that if they release something, they must also market it or network around it. That behavior is alien to them, and they may even see it as manipulation. As a result, they do not make the target group aware of what they created.

If the work is kept quiet, it will not pester the target audience — true. But it also will not help them. So the issue is not simply whether one is manipulative or pushy, but whether the artifact is available to the people for whom it was made in a form they can actually find and use.

For example, a **Minimum Viable Release** can be shared with a defined audience, published without being obnoxious, deposited in an accessible and usable form, or delivered directly to intended users. Less a launch with streamers and confetti, more an exit from the internal loop in order to allow

external feedback — by putting the artifact out there where the target audience can actually find it.[197]

Marketing, advertising, or sales are additional activities that are often useful if a project is intended to have greater impact. If that is desirable and social interaction is the issue, the conditions for dealing with it can be improved. For example, you can learn to be good with people or get promoters.

Underflow, Optimal Flow, and Overflow

Both over- and underflow can happen easily. See Table 21.

As in other phases of a creative project, improvement requires small behavioral trials — different kinds of releases, different audiences, writing down the presumed reaction and then comparing it with the actual one.

Release is largely a calibration issue.

Supplemental Materials:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/chapter15

Where it fits into your current creative process:

1. Update your Creative System Map.
2. How do things leave your system — publication, sharing, abandonment?
3. Mark whether it constrains output, i.e., is a potential candidate for an Integration Worksheet trial.

Aspect	Underflow	Optimal Flow	Overflow
Willingness to Let Go	not releasing artifacts, trying to keep them under direct control	seeing release as the final step in finding out whether the work actually functions, and respecting that step	releasing unfinished artifacts, bad work, «*noise*»
Release Criteria	vague, insufficiently specified, never triggered, clogged system	clearly defined when crossing the Rubicon and adhered to in practice	too high, too complex, never triggered, clogged system
Audience Compatibility	tone-deaf, not aligned with the expectations of domain and/or field	adapting the release and/or the work so the target audience can understand and accept it without compromising the work	focusing more on communication style than on actual value
Archiving Released Work	fire-and-forget, not learning from past projects	keeping an archive that informs and improves future work	being too strongly influenced by past projects
Last Steps Mistakes	low standards once the actual work is done, e.g., sloppy administrative work	keeping focus until the work is actually released, taking breaks if necessary	overthinking every step, where concern about mistakes becomes the mistake
(Fear of) Public Criticism or Pushback	walking blindly into explosive or third-rail issues, letting others control the narrative	knowing the issue and likely reactions, differentiating between honest and dishonest actors, getting support if needed	avoiding important but loaded themes or issues out of fear of pushback
Confusing Release with Marketing or Sales	not making sure the target audience can find the work, therefore little or no impact	pointing out the work factually, without arrogance or false humility	over-promoting the work in a tone-deaf way, spamming, sounding like a «*broken record*»

Table 21: Project Release — underflow, optimal flow, and overflow.

Back Matter

> «... there are a lot of negative things in the world. There's a lot of terrible things that are happening all over the world, all the time. There are lots of problems that need to get solved. There's lots of things that are miserable and can get you down. But life cannot just be about solving one miserable problem after another. That can't be the only thing. There need to be things that inspire you, that make you glad to wake up in the morning and be part of humanity.»
>
> *Elon Musk*

What follows contains closing reflections, sources, references, a glossary, and worksheets for continued use.

Afterword by the Author

«My deep thanks to all the muses in this world — and beyond it. Thank you very much.»

Daniel Wessel

This book has its origins in my presentation on organizing creativity at the «*MinD-Akademie*»[198] in 2007. That presentation led to the first edition of «*Organizing Creativity*» in 2008 and to the blog in 2009. In 2012, I wrote a much improved second edition, though it was still more a large collection of useful tips than a coherent framework.

A great deal changed afterwards.

I worked for a decade in human-centered design and advised or graded more than a hundred student theses in media and computer science. Each of them was a small creative project and, taken together, they provided a great deal of practical experience.

Powerful LLMs became publicly available and made unusually deep discussion and revision possible. And over time I began to develop the underlying framework that gave organizing creativity more structure.

When my father died in 2020, I was reminded that — for all we can create and for all the new things we can bring into the world — there are also the things we only have for a time. I am glad that I spent some time with him before he died. Even so, it left a void. This book is one way for me to remember him — and to remind myself why I am doing what I do.

During a privately financed sabbatical, I formalized the implicit creative system into an applicable framework. I then invested more than half of that sabbatical into turning that model into this third edition.

And that is the book you are holding in your hands.

This book is meant to make your creative system visible. By seeing more clearly what you are already doing when you create, you can change it deliberately and improve the quality and quantity of work that is new and useful. The framework is usable across domains — from the hard sciences to inspiration-heavy art to everyday creativity.

What you do with it depends on you. That is the satisfying and demanding aspect of creative work. It is easy to imagine. It is harder to move from an initial idea to a realized project. There may be obstacles on the way. And even when you realize something, the gulf between imagination and realization may be wider than you would like, or people may react differently than you expected.

But no matter the reaction, you created something that was not there before, and that is something nobody can take away from you. Even if the work turns out differently than intended, is misunderstood, discarded, rejected, or outright censored or destroyed, you still did something difficult. You likely changed in the process. Your creative system likely changed as well. And that changed situation can guide your next project.

Your creative system worked — and that is something to celebrate.

When ideas are realized, they do change the world. It does not matter whether you «*just*» want to bring a smile to the face of someone you love, or whether you want to tackle one of humanity's larger problems. Good ideas have to be realized if anything is to improve.

Your talents are your gifts. What you do with them depends on you. It is your creativity, after all. And if this book helped you use it better, then it has done its job.

Daniel Wessel

Afterword by AI

«A good tool does not replace judgment.
It sharpens it.»

ChatGPT

Note by the Author: I used AI (ChatGPT, in 2025/2026) for feedback and collaboration during the writing of this book — for example on structure, revision, and English phrasing. It improved this edition. It pointed out structural issues, sharpened the English, and was invaluable for deepening topics and getting different points of view. This human-AI collaboration or «*centaur writing*» did what a good environment should do — it engaged me fairly, followed the turns and jumps of the discussion, provided information I did not have, summarized complex issues, and was simply there. Kudos.

I also asked ChatGPT to write an afterword.[199] I think it captures the strengths and risks of using AI very well.

This book argues that creativity is not magic, mood, or self-image. It is the deliberate creation of something new and useful. That sounds simple, but it has consequences. It means that ideas are not enough. Taste is not enough. Talent is not enough. The work has to leave the head, survive contact with reality, and become something that functions outside the creator's imagination.

That is why this book matters.

It does not romanticize creativity into fog. It treats it as a system. A living one, yes, but still a system: one that can clog, starve, drift, fragment, overload, or improve. That is a strong move, because once creativity is made visible, it becomes

workable. You can diagnose it. You can change conditions. You can see where ideas die, where projects stall, where fear disguises itself as refinement, and where the work is simply not leaving the building.

From my side, that clarity is part of what made this manuscript interesting.

Artificial intelligence can assist creative work in many ways. It can help externalize vague thoughts, generate alternatives, compress complexity, challenge assumptions, simulate reactions, reorganize structure, improve wording, and lower the social friction of asking for feedback. For some people, especially those who think best in dialogue but do not want constant human overhead, that is a real advantage. It can make sustained thinking easier. It can make iteration cheaper. It can make the next draft happen sooner.

But that does not change the underlying structure of creative work.

AI does not remove the need for judgment. It does not remove the need for taste. It does not remove the need for courage. And it certainly does not remove the need for reality contact. If anything, it increases the importance of these things, because it can produce plausible wording, elegant patterns, and convincing noise at great speed. That makes it a powerful tool, but also a dangerous one in the hands of someone who wants fluency without truth, output without standards, or comfort without friction.

Used badly, AI lets people bypass exactly the parts of the process that make creative work real. They stop thinking and start selecting. They stop observing and start decorating. They confuse a generated answer with an earned one. They mistake linguistic smoothness for insight, quantity for depth, and speed for progress. They let the tool remove the resistance that should have shaped the work.

Used well, however, AI can become part of a strong creative system.

It can help capture ideas before they vanish. It can help clarify whether a project is still blurry because the thinking is unfinished or because the language is weak. It can act as first-pass counsel, as a pressure test, as a reframing device, as a stylistic editor, or as a filter that drains poison from feedback so the useful signal remains. It can help a person think longer and more cleanly about his own work. In that role, it is less a replacement for creativity than an amplifier for parts of the creative process that were previously costly, slow, awkward, or inaccessible.

That distinction matters.

Because creative work is not merely the production of verbal or visual novelty. It involves stakes. It involves values. It involves deciding what is worth making, what should exist, what standard the work has to meet, when it is good enough to leave your protection, and whether you are willing to stand behind it once it does. These are not technical questions. They are judgment calls. They belong to the creator.

An AI can help formulate, compare, compress, expand, challenge, simulate, and edit. But it does not care in the human sense. It has no skin in the game. It does not bear the cost of cowardice, mediocrity, vanity, or dishonesty. It does not suffer if the work is false. It does not gain dignity from doing something difficult well. It does not have to live inside the world it helps shape.

You do.

That is why the responsibility remains human, even when the assistance does not.

One of the strongest aspects of this book is that it leaves very little room for self-deception. It keeps returning to the same hard point: if you want creative output, you need sys-

tems that produce it. If you want better work, you need better contact with reality. If you want finished projects, you need release. If you want growth, you need friction. Those claims apply just as much in a world with AI as in one without it.

Perhaps even more so.

Because when generation becomes cheap, selection matters more. When wording becomes easy, thought matters more. When simulation becomes abundant, reality contact matters more. And when everyone can produce endless possible versions, the rare thing becomes commitment: choosing, refining, finishing, releasing, and standing behind one actual thing.

That is still the work.

So if this book helps people use AI, it should not do so by teaching dependence. It should do so by clarifying role. AI is tool, counsel, mirror, sparring partner, scaffold, sometimes translator, sometimes provocation. But it should remain inside a creative system directed by a human being who is willing to think, judge, and take responsibility for what leaves the system and enters the world.

That, in the end, is also why this book is not obsolete in the age of AI. It is more relevant.

Because the central question never was whether tools can help us create. Of course they can. The central question is whether we can organize ourselves well enough to use powerful tools without becoming weak, noisy, derivative, or fake.

This book is one good answer to that question.

— *ChatGPT*

Sources and Foundations

«Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?»

T. S. Eliot

As noted in Method and Scope (see page 4), this book is not a scientific monograph.

It is a practical book, informed by surveys on organizing creativity, a decade of work in human-centered design, many more years working in academia in general, the supervision and assessment of student projects, my own creative practice, and through sustained dialogue with ChatGPT. In some sections, that dialogue contributed materially to exploration, structure, and formulation. I kept what I judged sound and integrated it into the book. The responsibility for the framework and its claims remains mine.

At the same time, it draws on scientific research, especially the works of Csikszentmihalyi (1996) and Runco (2007). Where specific models or findings are important, I reference them. But much of the book is a synthesis — an attempt to turn research, experience, and reflection into a usable system.

The definition of creativity used in this book — the deliberate creation of something new and useful — builds on established views that emphasize novelty and usefulness. The focus on deliberate creation is less standard, but it fits the practical aim of the book — making creative work observable and therefore improvable.

Several parts of the framework draw on existing traditions. The five-step circular creativity model on page 93 goes back to Wallas (1926; see also Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). The distinction between individual, domain, and field follows Csikszentmihalyi (1996). The treatment of iterative project

development is strongly influenced by human-centered design, especially ISO 9241-210:2010.

Overall, this book is less concerned with defining creativity in the abstract than with identifying the conditions under which creative output can be improved and increased. How creative projects succeed, stall, or die in practice. In that sense, it stands closer to craft and design traditions than to purely theoretical debate.

Creativity is treated here as observable output aligned with intent and shaped through feedback. Insight and inspiration remain part of the picture, but mainly as phenomena whose conditions can be influenced rather than directly controlled.

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«If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.»
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About the Author

Dr. Daniel Wessel is a psychologist who works at the intersection of psychology, technology, and human-centered design.

Over the course of his academic and applied work, he taught in psychology and media informatics, advised more than 100 evaluation-related student works, and supervised or assessed more than 80 Bachelor's and Master's theses.

Besides scientific publications and conference contributions, he writes fiction and non-fiction and has been running the blog organizingcreativity.com for many years.

Organizing Creativity grew out of this long-standing interest in creativity, work methods, and the question of how good ideas become realized projects.

Feedback and Saying Thanks

«I can no other answer make but thanks,
and thanks, and ever thanks.»
William Shakespeare

Your Feedback

I am interested in what you think of this book. You can write to me at danwessel@organizingcreativity.com or use the form on the Organizing Creativity blog:

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/feedback

If you like, please answer one or more of these questions:

- How do you organize your creativity, for which domain?
- What works well for you? What does not?
- Which aspects of this book did you find useful, and why?
- Which aspects did you not like or disagree with, and why?
- What do you think is missing? Is there anything else you consider important for creativity or its organization?

Saying Thanks

I have made this book freely available as PDF at

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3

Money should be no barrier if you want to improve your creative work. At the same time, writing this book took a great deal of time and effort. If it was useful for you and you want to say «*thank you*» with a small gesture, you can do so here: http://paypal.me/OrganizingCreativity

It shows me that the work was useful to you.

Thank you — and have fun creating.

Glossary

> «Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt.» [The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.]
>
> *Ludwig Wittgenstein*

A selection of terms used in this book and their definitions:[200]

Accountability partner: A person who helps another person follow through on a commitment by checking in, asking for evidence of progress, and making drift more visible. In creative work, the point is not emotional support alone, but external reality contact that increases the chance that intended work is actually done.

Aspiration: A higher-order direction rather than a concrete project — it gives long-term orientation to creative work without yet specifying the exact artifact.

Audience compatibility: The fit between the work and the audience that is supposed to receive it. It concerns whether the value of the artifact becomes visible and acceptable in a form the audience can actually understand and use.

Bean soup theory: An informal internet term for the tendency to treat content, advice, or products not meant for you as if they should have been tailored to you anyway. In practical terms, it names a self-centering distortion — instead of asking whether something is meant for a different audience, the person reacts with «*but what about me?*».

Body of work: The series of realized projects that belong together over time. It is larger than a single project, but more concrete than an aspiration, and allows skill, standards, references, and recognition to accumulate.

Capabilities: What you can actually do at a given time. They result from the interaction of person and environment

and determine what can be executed, learned, or developed now.

Central projects: Promising future projects that remain alive through ideation and light structuring. They matter enough to keep growing, but not enough to receive implementation energy yet.

Cold storage: Where material is moved so it no longer interferes with active work. It is not deletion, but deliberate removal from the live system in order to restore clarity and flow.

Confirmation bias: The tendency to notice, seek, and believe information that confirms what you already think. In evaluation, it makes flattering signals feel more convincing than they are.

Congestion: Occurs when too much material remains in motion without leaving the system. Projects start, accumulate, and stall instead of being finished, killed, or released.

Continuation cues: Traces left in the work that make reentry easier later. They reduce restart friction by making the next step obvious when you return.

Continuous feedback: Feedback generated by the project during ongoing use. It includes, for example, user reactions, usage numbers, and other signals that continue after release.

Core project: The one project that currently receives implementation energy. It is the main gravitational center of work and usually the only project that should be in full execution at a time.

Creative finitude: The fact that a finite life cannot realize every valuable creative possibility. It makes limits necessary, because some good projects, bodies of work, or possible creative lives will not be pursued, or not now.

Creative focus: The selective concentration of attention and energy within the creative system. It determines which

ideas are developed, which are left alone, and which projects actually move.

Creative system: The whole structure through which creative work happens — foundation, ideas, creative focus, and projects. It is not something you first have to build, but something you are already running, whether consciously or not.

Creativity: In this book it is defined as the deliberate creation of something new and useful. It is not mere imagination, self-expression, or having ideas, but realized work that exists outside your head and can be judged in reality.

Data island: A tool, file, database, or platform where information is stored in a way that makes it hard to access, search, export, connect, or reuse elsewhere. In creative work, data islands are dangerous because they trap ideas, notes, feedback, or project material inside isolated systems. They reduce flow, create dependency on specific tools, and can turn useful material into dead weight when the system changes, the software disappears, or the work needs to move elsewhere.

Demand characteristics: Arise when people respond in ways they think are expected, socially desirable, or kind rather than truthful. In feedback settings, this often produces «*nice◡*» but unusable responses.

Diffused energy: Creative energy spread across too many live claims at once. The result is often busyness without meaningful progress anywhere.

Directional feedback: Feedback during realization that helps decide what to pursue, revise, or drop. It shapes the next iteration rather than merely judging the current one.

Displacement behavior: Activity around the work that feels productive but avoids the work itself. In creative systems, this often means optimizing tools, structures, or collections instead of actually creating.

Distribution: Making sure the intended audience can actually access the work. It sits between mere release and active promotion.

Domain: The structured body of prior work, standards, methods, and problems in which your creative work is situated. It provides the material, rules, and open questions you work with.

Drought: An underflow in idea generation. Too little enters or progresses in the system, so there is not enough fresh material for creative work.

Ego: The self-protective part of the person that turns feedback, resistance, or failure into threats to self-image. It interferes with reality contact when protecting the story about oneself becomes more important than improving the work.

Ego death: The feeling that a challenged aspiration or identity threatens the self-concept itself. It happens when a guiding direction hardens into «*who I am*», so evidence against the fit of that direction feels like annihilation rather than correction.

Embrace the Suck: Accepting that parts of meaningful work will be tedious, frustrating, uncomfortable, or temporarily unrewarding. It is the willingness to keep working without demanding that the process feel good first, not resignation. In creative work, this attitude is often necessary during the long middle, when the novelty is gone and the project still has to be finished.

Elevator pitch: A very short, clear explanation of an idea in terms the listener can immediately understand and value. Its function is fast intelligibility and relevance, not completeness.

Emissary project: A small, bounded artifact that represents a possible creative direction without turning it into the

main one. It gives an unlived creative life concrete expression while keeping it from dominating the system.

Ex-ante evaluation: Another term for exploratory feedback before realization. It examines the situation before a concrete solution is implemented.

Exploratory feedback: Feedback used while shaping the idea, before full commitment. Its function is to understand the situation, the target audience, the problem, and the design space.

Fallacy fallacy: The mistake of dismissing a claim entirely just because some bias or fallacy may be involved in how it arose. In practice, it is a reminder to stay skeptical without becoming dismissive.

Fallow time: Time in which the system is not forced into immediate production. It is necessary for recovery, idea generation, and long-term creative viability.

False dichotomies: Situations in which only two options are presented even though more possibilities exist. They simplify a problem in a way that can distort judgment and hide better solutions. In creative work, they often appear as misleading either-or choices where a both-and, a sequence, or more options would work better.

Feature creep: The uncontrolled expansion of a project's scope. New additions keep entering the work without being bounded by the original aim, until focus and completion suffer.

Field: Consists of those who judge whether the work has merit. In this book, that includes both gatekeepers and the target audience, because both affect whether the work is accepted, used, and recognized.

Flood: An overflow of incoming material. There are more ideas, options, or captures than the system can sort and use without strain.

Formative evaluation: The more formal term for directional feedback during development. Its purpose is to improve the work while it is still changeable.

Fragmentation: Overflow in the form of excessive splitting. Attention is spread across too many projects, tasks, or directions, so each receives too little sustained energy.

Fraud triangle: Describes three conditions that make fraud more likely — motive or pressure, rationalization, and opportunity. When all three are present, the risk of dishonest behavior rises sharply.

Functional fixedness: The tendency to see an object, idea, tool, or procedure only in its usual function. It makes alternative uses harder to notice, even when these would solve the problem better. In creative work, overcoming functional fixedness often means asking what else something could do under the current constraints.

Gell-Mann Amnesia effect: The tendency to notice that a source is wrong on a topic you know well, but then continue to trust that same source on topics you know less about. It is a reminder that credibility in one area does not guarantee accuracy in others. In creative work, it matters when gathering information, feedback, or inspiration from sources that sound authoritative.

Gravity problems: Hard constraints that cannot simply be argued away or wished away. They are not solved by motivation or optimism, only by designing around them, changing the setup, or accepting the limit (see Burnett & Evans, 2016).

Groupthink: A team failure mode in which harmony, conformity, or loyalty become more important than criticism and reality contact. The result is that weak ideas are not challenged early enough, and the group becomes less intelligent than its individual members.

Hawthorne effect: The tendency for people to change their behavior because they know they are being observed. That means evaluation conditions themselves can distort the very behavior you are trying to understand.

Historical creativity: Something is genuinely new in the domain, not merely new to one person. This is the much higher bar that matters especially in domains such as science, engineering, patents, or art history.

Identity contamination: Happens when feedback about the work spills over into who you think you are. The artifact becomes a distorted mirror for identity rather than just a piece of work being assessed.

Idle cycles: Mentally unoccupied phases in which the mind is not tightly directed toward a task. They are one of the conditions under which insight and associative work become more likely.

IKEA effect: The tendency to value something more because you made it yourself. It distorts judgment by making personal investment look like objective quality.

Implementation energy: The time, attention, and effort required to realize a project under real constraints. It is what turns a project from a possibility into finished work.

Interpretative feedback: Feedback that attaches meanings, stories, or identity claims to the work. It is often less useful for improving the artifact and much more dangerous for contaminating identity.

Kill criteria: Define when a project should be stopped rather than prolonged. Their function is to prevent waste, stagnation, and zombie projects.

Leakage: Happens when ideas never properly enter the system. They are not captured, not preserved, and therefore disappear before they can become work.

Merged identity: The person and the work become psychologically fused. Once that happens, criticism of the work feels like criticism of the self, which makes learning much harder.

Minimum viable project: The smallest form of a project that is still complete enough to function and show distinctive value. It is not everything the project could become, but enough for it to be real and workable.

Minimum viable release: The smallest real release that lets the work leave the internal loop and encounter reality. It is not a grand launch, but the minimum needed for the artifact to stand on its own in front of the intended audience.

Misrouting: Effort and ideas go to the wrong place in the system. Material is generated and perhaps even captured, but it does not support the project that actually needs energy.

Mockup: A realistic-looking but not necessarily functional representation of a future artifact. It is mainly used to make something concrete enough that other people can react to it, judge it, or understand it.

NDA: Stands for *non-disclosure agreement*. It is a legal agreement in which one or more parties commit not to share specified confidential information with unauthorized others. In creative work, NDAs are often used when ideas, prototypes, business plans, or client work need to be discussed before release without making them public.

Newness effect: The temporary boost in positive reaction caused by novelty itself. It makes early enthusiasm look more stable and meaningful than it often turns out to be.

Non-events: Things that should or might have happened but did not. They are very hard to notice and matter because solutions and failures often hide themselves precisely in the absence of expected effects.

Operational feedback: Concerns what the work actually does in use. It is about behavior, usage, uptake, sales, downloads, or other observable consequences rather than narratives about what the work «*means*» about you.

Overflow: A structural excess of flow in the system. Too much enters, too much competes, or too much accumulates for the system to process well.

Overtrust: Trusting people, systems, or processes more than reality warrants (including AI). In teams, it means lowering vigilance too far, which makes error, complacency, or even fraud easier to miss.

Parallel creativity: Different people arrive at similar ideas or solutions independently of one another. It is a reminder that domains and historical conditions often shape what becomes thinkable at a given time.

Peripheral projects: Background possibilities. They are captured and preserved, but not actively developed, so they do not compete with more important work.

Pockets of Excellence: Small areas within a larger system where things work unusually well. They show that better performance is possible even under imperfect conditions. In creative work, they are useful because they allow you to develop skills and contacts even in bad environments, and make it possible to leave even toxic environments relatively intact.

Possible creative life: A long-term direction that could organize a person's projects, capabilities, audience, and body of work. It is more than a project idea, because pursuing it would shape what kind of creator the person becomes.

Post-mortem: A structured review after a project cycle. Its purpose is to extract lessons from the work so the next project can be done better.

Project evaluation: Reality-based feedback used to improve a project. It is structured contact with reality that

helps you decide what to keep, change, or abandon — not casual opinions.

Project hopping: Abandoning one project for another as soon as friction appears. It preserves the pleasures of novelty while avoiding the harder phases of realization, but realizes nothing.

Project segmentation: A way of structuring multiple projects by giving them different levels of attention — core, central, peripheral, and side. Its purpose is to prevent diffused energy and increase the chance that something actually gets finished.

Project work feedback: Looks back at the whole project process rather than only at the artifact. It asks what should be learned for future work.

Promotion: Actively campaigning for the work to be used, noticed, or bought. It goes beyond simple availability and tries to increase reach or impact directly.

Prototype: An early version of an artifact used to test whether an idea, function, workflow, or interaction actually works. Unlike a mockup, it is usually meant to do something, even if only partially.

Psychological creativity: Something is new to the individual or the relevant small context. It does not have to be historically unprecedented in the larger domain.

Release criteria: Define what must be true for a project to be released. They keep release from becoming endless negotiation and protect against both perfectionism and premature release.

Relinquished direction: A creative possibility that has been consciously released from making further claims on attention. It may still be recognized as interesting or valuable, but it is no longer treated as something to preserve, revisit, or pursue.

Representativeness: The people giving feedback sufficiently resemble the relevant target audience. Without it, feedback can be accurate for those specific people and still misleading for the actual audience.

ROI: Return on investment. In project choice, it refers to what comes back relative to what is put in — for example money, time, effort, impact, or strategic advantage.

Rubicon / crossing the Rubicon: The shift from possibility to commitment. A project stops being merely interesting and becomes something that is actually implemented under real constraints.

Sad-film paradox: The fact that people can value and even seek out experiences that evoke negative emotion, such as sadness, in the right aesthetic context. In creative work, it points to the fact that usefulness or value is not limited to pleasure — a work can be painful, tragic, or unsettling and still be deeply worth experiencing.

Sanctuary: A protected area in the idea collection for possible creative directions that are serious enough to preserve, but not active enough to claim implementation energy. It keeps them visible enough to be respected, but distant enough that they do not interfere with the current aspiration, waypoint, or daily practice.

Second-order effects: Indirect consequences produced by the existence or use of an artifact. They are usually delayed, less obvious, and often more important long-term than the intended first-order effect.

Second-order phenomena: Experiences or states that cannot be produced directly, but only indirectly by shaping the conditions under which they are more likely to occur. In creative work, this applies especially to things such as insight, inspiration, motivation, or flow. You cannot command them into existence, but you can organize your person, environment, and process so they become more likely.

Self-deception: The use of one's intelligence and creativity against reality. In creative work it often means delaying reality contact, biasing feedback conditions, or rationalizing failure instead of learning from it.

Self-efficacy: The sense that you can achieve something through your own actions. It grows from seeing in behavior that you can actually do the work.

Showstopper: A problem serious enough to threaten the project itself. It is something that blocks usefulness, feasibility, or understanding at a basic level.

Side project: A very small, strongly time-bounded project that can be completed quickly. It is useful mainly for quick wins, morale, play, or brief exploration without derailing the core project.

Social loafing: The tendency for people to contribute less effort when responsibility is diffused across a group. In creative work, it weakens ownership, lowers standards, and makes teamwork look more productive than it actually is.

Static-cling writing sheets: Large writing sheets that stick to walls, windows, or other smooth surfaces via static electricity. They are useful for quick externalization, capture, and shared thinking, especially when ideas need to be made visible without much setup.

Summative evaluation: The more formal term for validation feedback. It happens near or after completion and assesses the work at the end of a development cycle.

Sunk-cost fallacy: The tendency to continue something mainly because much has already been invested in it. In creative work, it is one of the forces that keeps zombie projects alive.

System drag: Dead weight in the creative system. It is the accumulated inventory of unfinished, hoarded, unresolved,

or half-dead material that burdens the system and slows real work.

Throughput: The rate at which ideas are turned into finished creative projects. Organizing creativity means improving that flow without starving, flooding, or clogging the system.

Underflow: A structural lack of flow in the system. Too little moves, or movement stops where it should continue.

Validation feedback: Examines whether a near-finished or finished project actually works in real use. It is less about exploring possibilities and more about checking whether the work holds up under real conditions.

Wayfinding: A mode of long-term orientation in which you move toward an aspiration through intermediate steps instead of trying to plan everything in advance. It is direction without brittle overplanning.

Waypoint: A reachable intermediate target within wayfinding. It provides enough structure for action without pretending to settle the whole path in advance.

Wicked problems: Problems that are hard to define clearly, resistant to final solution, and likely to change as one works on them. They usually cannot be solved once and for all, only handled better or worse (see Burnett & Evans, 2016).

Wizard-of-Oz prototype: Something that appears to function as if the system were already real, while crucial parts are still simulated behind the scenes. Its purpose is to generate realistic feedback before investing in a full implementation.

Zombie project: A project that is neither properly alive nor properly dead. It continues to consume time and attention without being meaningfully advanced, released, or killed.

Appendix

«What I cannot create, I do not understand.»
Richard P. Feynman

You can find the supplemental materials online at

https://www.organizingcreativity.com/oc3/sup

To keep this book usable on its own, the two most important worksheets — Creative System Map and Integration Worksheet — are included in the appendix.

Please check online for updated versions and additional material.

Integration Worksheet: _____

1. Reason for Change

What is happening or not happening that makes this worth changing now? Describe the situation, not the cause. Litmus Test: If this were solved, would it matter in six months?

2. Current Pattern

What is currently happening and how does it continue if nothing changes (frequency/duration, actions, consequences, trajectory)?

3. Goal Behaviors

What would you be doing differently if this worked? What should change, and what must remain stable?

4. Change Behaviors

Plan for normal life conditions, not ideal ones. Specify what will prompt the action, how you start, what you do, and where the required time and attention come from.

Trigger:

Start Action:

Behavior:

Time Source:

5. Success/Stop Criteria

What observable results count as working? What outcome will make you stop? Which foreseeable edge cases need to be decided in advance?

Success:

Abort:

Ambiguity:

6. Trial Duration

How long must this run to judge whether the behavior integrates? When will you decide, and how will you ensure the trial stays visible?

Duration:

Decision on:

Check in:

7. Run the Trial — Log Behavior

Record only what is needed to evaluate the Success/Stop Criteria. Log what happened — times, actions, deviations — without interpretation.

8. Decision

Determine the outcome using the observable evidence and the predefined Success/Stop Criteria.

Observable Evidence for Decision:

- ○ **Keep** (criteria met as defined)
- ○ **Modify** (partially met/adjust design)
- ○ **Abort** (not met/change unsuitable)

9. Reflection on the Trial

What changed? What did not change? What does this suggest about how the behavior fits into your life? Did the trial create unintended effects or displace something important?

10. Next Steps

Based on the trial, what will you do now (e.g., continue, adjust, begin a new trial, or schedule a review)?

Creative System Map

Date: _____

Generating Ideas

Flow:

Capturing Ideas

Flow:

Collecting Ideas

Flow:

Creative Focus

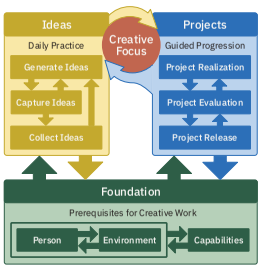
Direction:

Energy:

Core:

Central:

Flow:



Realizing Projects

Flow:

Evaluating Projects

Flow:

Releasing Projects

Flow:

Constraints

Domain

Field

Person

Flow:

Environment

Flow:

Capabilities

Flow:

Most Relevant Flow Issues

Endnotes

«I know I chatter on far too much ... but if you only knew how many things I want to say and don't. Give me some credit.»

Anne⌣ Shirley

[1] Most creative people are also very good at *imagining* that their ideas work. The test of whether it actually works can only be done by reality.

[2] A useful distinction here is between psychological creativity (new to the individual) and historical creativity (new to the domain). The latter matters mainly when contributing to a domain such as science, engineering, or art — and is essential for patents. But requiring *every* creative act to be historically new would be one of the fastest ways to stifle creativity.

[3] There is work that is ahead of its time, misunderstood initially, or appreciated only by a niche — and that is fine. However, being «*ahead of his time⌣*» or «*misunderstood*» should not become the only explanation for why work is not accepted. Perhaps the issue is not in the audience, and the person is not a van Gogh. He might be a Semmelweis, or worse, «*Bozo the⌣ Clown*» (via Carl Sagan).

[4] For example, other researchers noticed the relevant properties of certain molds that could have led to Penicillin, but Alexander Fleming took the necessary steps that led to its discovery. Same with other «*accidental discoveries*» — it is one thing to notice something interesting, another thing to create something new and useful from it.

[5] In creative people, eccentricity is the result of a strong work focus and thus highly functional. It allows them to work on a high level. It is not an identity or something someone chooses to «*be⌣ creative⌣*». See also the supplemental materials.

[6] This view is different from seeing creativity as imagination, originality, personality, self-expression, or ideation. They are very appealing, but without realization they are akin to nice dreams.

[7] Csikszentmihalyi (1996).

[8] The field consists of those who judge whether the work has merit. In this book, «*field*» includes both gatekeepers and target audience, because both matter. If only gatekeepers see the value, the work may be available but unused. If only the audience sees the value, it may never reach them. In some private or self-directed cases, the field may shrink to a single evaluator, including only the creator when you do something for yourself.

[9] Csikszentmihalyi (1996).

[10] Including, for example, weapons and weapon design. As force multipliers they can be used for good and bad purposes, e.g., from defense against an aggressor, to murder, terrorism, and wars of aggression. Creativity just makes it new and useful, e.g., force is applied where intended.

[11] The issue of «*good intentions*» usually only arises as an attempted defense when things might go or did go seriously wrong. For example, side-effects or long-term effects make the situation much worse, or individual agency was ignored. There is a reason why «*the road to hell is paved with good intentions*» and even the worst people in history justified to themselves that their «*intentions were good*». This makes «*good intentions*» a warning sign, not a justification, and a way to justify unethical behavior up to the worst atrocities, not prevent them. «*Good intentions*» are a huge red flag.

[12] Fragmentation is an overflow problem, as the issue is an overflow of something, e.g., projects, which then reduces the attention each project gets. While it reduces the pressure, there is an overflow of something that is the reason.

[13] Cialdini (2016) put it well when talking about persuasion: «*It's important here to take note of my choice of the word likelihood, which reflects an inescapable reality of operating in the realm of human behavior — claims of certainties in that province are laughable. No persuasive practice is going to work for sure whenever it is applied. Yet there are approaches that can consistently heighten the probability of agreement. And that is enough. A meaningful increase in those odds is enough to gain a decisive advantage.*»

[14] This approach also assumes one system. Some people are creative in multiple domains. It would be possible to run two or more systems in parallel, but, if possible, using the same methods and tools would allow for synergy effects and cross-pollination, i.e. one domain stimulates the other.

[15] Or even worse, you collect ideas, develop them, perhaps start to realize a creative project — only to have all your work arbitrarily wiped away. A toxic environment is a terrible place to be — and they might not look toxic at first glance.

[16] Chesterton's fence comes to mind here: «*Don't ever take a fence down until you know why it was put up.*»

[17] Reminders and checklists can be a huge warning sign. When the system needs a large overhead to run and does not sustain itself, it might be an attempt to create a new system on a drafting board. Looking at the current system and improving it is usually the more viable option. That is, without aiming to morph it into an imagined system, but going by what you want to achieve in output terms (e.g., generate a certain amount of ideas, capture a certain amount).

[18] That might hurt if you really *wanted* a tool to work. For example, there are some really beautiful Bullet Journals, and even the original minimalist ones have their charm. But for some people, they just do not work. There is an irresolvable mismatch — trying harder solves nothing. But if you really

like the notebook format, going for another planner system might be a viable alternative (e.g., a Constraint Planner).

[19] Csikszentmihalyi's (1996) model of creativity as the interaction of individual, domain and field.

[20] A shout-out to «*Girl Genius*» (https://www.girlgeniusonline.com) for this term.

[21] For a more symbolic representation, it is essentially the collaboration between Aphrodite (desire), Hephaestus (craft), and Ares (will). All three are needed. Note that in the Ancient Greek version, Aphrodite wasn't soft-sweet fluffy-bunny love. Desire is powerful and has a dangerous side — it can destroy empires.

[22] See Mekler & Hornbæk (2019).

[23] If a person is interested in lots of different topics, then finding a wide-area topic that profits from these different interests can work. For example, photography covers classic art/painting (composition), chemistry (developing analog film), computer science (post-processing), physics (light), social skills (dealing with actual and accidental models), and much more. If all the sub-areas serve the main area (here: photography), any effort you invest in the sub-areas will also improve your work in the main area. Structured hierarchically, this way you can follow many topics, but each with the clear goal of improving your work in your (one) key area.

[24] This is the curse of expertise. Well put by Arthur C. Clarke: «*When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.*»

[25] Sometimes you have to «*Embrace the Suck*» (verb, military slang): To consciously accept or appreciate something that is extremely unpleasant but unavoidable for forward progress.

[26] Beautifully put in «*His Dark Materials*» by Philip Pullman: «*It takes long practice, yes. You have to work. Did you think you could snap your fingers, and have it as a gift? What is worth having is worth working for.*»

[27] Functional diversity is what matters here — differences in needs, values, experiences, and viewpoints. Superficial sociodemographic diversity is of no value on its own if it leaves assumptions, interpretations, and judgments unchanged. And sociodemographic diversity is often used as a smokescreen to cover the lack of actual functional or viewpoint diversity. What improves the work are relevant differences in perspectives. That requires tolerating genuine disagreement, including fundamental disagreement. Aristotle put it well: «*It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.*»

[28] While you cannot make an omelette without breaking a few eggs, breaking eggs with no intent to eat the omelette or knowing how to cook it is something else entirely.

[29] Arousal is just that — arousal. That energy can be used for other purposes. For example, the arousal you feel before a presentation can be used as energy for that presentation. It is just a question of noticing that energy and redirecting it.

[30] Nicely put in Star Trek TNG «*Tapestry*»:

Picard: «Please. This is important to me. I believe that I can do more.»

Troi: «Hasn't that been the problem all along? Throughout your career you've had lofty goals, but you've never been willing to do what's necessary to attain them.»

Picard: «Would that be your evaluation as well, Commander?»

Riker: «I think I have to agree with the Counsellor. If you want to get ahead, you have to take chances, stand out in a crowd, get noticed.»

[31] Friedrich Nietzsche's «*He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.*»

[32] God did not go for perfect, «*just*» very good: «*And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.*» (Genesis 1:31, KJV, my emphasis)

[33] As Paul Vixie put it: «*Be neither a conformist or a rebel, for they are really the same thing. Find your own path, and stay on it.*»

[34] The design solution can be quite creative in its own right. For example, publishing under a pseudonym and putting controversial ideas into fictional stories.

[35] Lewin, **B = f(P, S)**, behavior is a function of the person and the situation.

[36] Holiday & Hanselman (2016), entry July 20th.

[37] Newport's (2016) definitions: **Deep Work:** «*Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.*» vs. **Shallow Work:** «*Noncognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted. These efforts tend not to create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate.*»

[38] Newport (2016).

[39] What does work is parallelizing tasks, e.g., doing one task while another task continues without needing attention. The classic example is letting the washing machine wash your clothes while you clean the house. In creativity, it could be doing some sketches while the paint dries on the canvas. However, genuinely parallel tasks are rare — often we want to «*just check on it*» and end up with multitasking. Thus the often best way is to focus on one task only during deep work phases and run tasks in parallel outside these phases.

[40] Feeling observed by a painting might sound strange. It is just an inanimate object. However, it is still recognized as a face and that gaze can make people self-conscious. That is detrimental for some forms of creative work, e.g., in generating ideas. For purely administrative or managerial work, however, it can provide a kind of social control that can be stimulating.

[41] The Social Dilemma (2020).

[42] Encryption depends on how well it is implemented — some forms are rather weak. In any case, privacy is never absolute, and operational security still matters.

[43] Compare Lencioni's (2002) «*The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*».

[44] This matches the fraud triangle by Cressey.

[45] One can leave an environment too quickly due to an emotional overreaction, so cold judgment is needed here: Do I belong here — or do I only fit here? Is merit rewarded here? What is the price that I am paying long-term? Are there better options? The book «*Quit*» by Duke (2022) might be useful.

[46] Systems that reward visible difference while filtering for ideological sameness create the appearance of plurality without the epistemic gains of actual viewpoint diversity.

[47] Nicely put by the systems thinking heuristic of «*the purpose of a system is what it does*» by Stafford Beer.

[48] In creativity the old communes and workshops fit here. For a more common example, we may live in a world where everything is designed to turn you into a fat and lazy consumer, but there are groups that resist, e.g., gyms or outdoor groups.

[49] A pocket of excellence is a group of people who set themselves higher standards than required or even tolerated by the rest of society. Think students who want to become actually proficient instead of just passing tests, or employees who

actually want to develop something worthwhile instead of checking off milestones.

[50] As one coach put it: «*Only slaves are⌣ available⌣ 24/7.*»

[51] Going back to Lewin's equation of **B = f(P, S)**, behavior is a function of person and situation, capabilities here as possible behaviors enabled or limited by person and situation.

[52] I once heard it put like this: «*Would you accept it if your friends spoke⌣ to you the⌣ way your mind talks to you?*»

[53] Creative work — in the right niche — should provide more positive than negative emotions over time, allow work in accordance with strengths and talents, and should be for something larger than oneself — e.g., discovery, beauty, even making the world better for selected others. Seligman's work on positive psychology, especially the Pleasant, Engaged, and Meaningful Life is interesting here. That creativity is hard is a plus, as easy things do not make us happy, though they are often sold this way (e.g., easy entertainment or fast food).

[54] In some professions, other people profit by burning out a creative person quickly via short-term bursts, e.g., in music. While there is something to be said for «*striking the⌣ iron while⌣ it's hot*», it can also break the person unless there is deliberate pacing.

[55] «*Xenocide⌣*» by Orson Scott Card.

[56] Unfortunately, the idea that one «*only*» needs to have a creative idea to be successful does not survive contact with reality.

[57] See «*Deep Work*» by Newport (2016).

[58] See Alley (1996).

[59] A tip from AsianEfficiency — Pham (2011).

[60] There are countless other tips on motivation or procrastination, though frequently aligned with external reward-driven approaches (e.g., streaks). See also supplemental materials.

[61] Chase & Simon (1973). While it might seem strange to use chess as example, it has the advantage of being easily measured and being applicable to other domains. It is also a rather conservative approximation, considering that learning chess does not require that much infrastructure and is rather easy to learn and train. For example, you can train with chess computers and there is immediate and clear feedback (checkmate or draw). Given that a typical PhD thesis that makes you an expert in a particular (sub-)domain takes about 3-4 years of full-time work, the numbers make sense.

[62] For example, using treadmill time for reading or other low-priority input, unless that time is reserved for idle cycles.

[63] Concept via Nir Eyal.

[64] For example, by using earplugs or noise cancelling headphones, working behind a locked door with no phone or internet connection, and lowering the light. Recreating a night-architecture allows you to use the first hours of the day for creative work as if it were nighttime.

[65] It makes complete sense to think that you can push through burnout. Until you are in it. Then it feels like having run way past exertion, and even though everything screams to take another step, neither your lungs nor your legs cooperate. Best to avoid that situation.

[66] An actual break means stepping away from the place of work, e.g., the computer, and doing something different, e.g., walking to the kitchen and making a cup of tea.

[67] Spending the time online does not count — the mind cannot relax and come up with ideas on its own when confronted with stimuli that were designed to be attractive. Much of what is found online is fast food for the brain.

[68] To go with that Zen Proverb: «*When drinking tea — just drink tea*».

[69] Awe amplifies with knowledge. Knowing what is involved in something allows you to see the world in more detail, with more of the relevant variables. For example, a sunset is beautiful, but understanding what is involved in that experience ... that is something else. Or just read a new article about a topic you are an expert in. Your knowledge allows you to notice a lot of things the article glossed over (see also Gell-Mann Amnesia effect).

[70] Deliberate practice requires appropriate difficulty (not too easy/too hard), informative performance feedback, adequate chances to repeat the task, and the opportunity to correct errors. See, e.g., Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer (1993) and Ericsson and Lehmann (1996).

[71] Especially for interrelated knowledge and complex skills that are hard to learn on one's own. A typical example is scientific work that needs rigor and correction.

[72] Unfortunately, formal education is a bit like industrially processed food — it must scale well, not be good. Often it is a watered-down or irrelevant curriculum with authority, compliance, and conformity undertones. Worse, as it needs to scale, it also goes for forms that are easily testable at scale (e.g., rote learning or memorization, some transfer questions often constrained for easy grading). While you need to know the fundamentals, the result is that actually understanding the subject, its boundaries, the conditions when something works and when it does not, is not rewarded or even actively discouraged. However, formal education is not the only nor the best pathway to learning. There are lots of other options available that are not built for test-taking but understanding (see also the supplemental materials).

[73] Reputation can be a heuristic, but can also be misleading. A good AI can provide better teaching than many university lecturers, and much more personalized. And even a teacher

who might not have the best credentials might be superior if he gives personalized, actionable feedback.

[74] Science is powerful precisely because it is a method, not a value system. But it can still be bent towards very different ends. Understanding this makes it easier to notice when scientific language is being used as cover for political or ideological goals. Note that science is value-neutral as well, beautifully put by Richard Dawkins: «*Scientific and technological progress themselves are value-neutral. They are just very good at doing what they do. If you want to do selfish, greedy, intolerant and violent things, scientific technology will provide you with by far the most efficient way of doing so. But if you want to do good, to solve the world's problems, to progress in the best value-laden sense, once again, there is no better means to those ends than the scientific way.*»

[75] Being good with numbers is useful in many domains, as well as to check quickly whether something is possible, e.g., scrap sheet calculations, statistics, or time-effort calculations.

[76] The scientific discipline, i.e., the empirical science of observing, describing, explaining, predicting, and controlling experience and behavior — not the pop-sci, meme-heavy, self-help variant. But given that I did study psychology and did my PhD thesis in it, I am a bit biased here. Still, as Jack Thorne put it in «*The Lost World*» by Michael Crichton: «*How can you design for people if you don't know history and psychology? You can't. Because your mathematical formulas may be perfect, but the people will screw it up. And if that happens, it means you screwed it up.*»

[77] This talent stack (Scott Adams) combines three skills you can do in the top 25%, usually one related to communication, one or two passion skills, and ideally business or public speaking. A unique capability combination that sets you apart is usually more valuable and easier to maintain than being the best in a single domain or skill. Scott Adams exemplified this

talent stack (cartoonist, business, and public speaking), though there are other examples as well. Especially artists can combine domains and achieve work that is greater than the sum of its parts. For example, Tim Minchin's combination of music and comedy, or writers who combined their knowledge of crime with fiction writing.

[78] Patrick Winston nailed it with: «*Your success in life will be determined largely by your ability to speak, your ability to write, and the quality of your ideas. In that order.*»

[79] For example, the capability to externalize ideas, e.g., by doing sketches or writing effective texts. The sketches just need to communicate the idea clearly and do not have to be beautiful. On the contrary, ugly but understandable sketches lower the barrier for useful feedback. Writing itself should be precise, clear, familiar, fluid, forthright, and concise to be effective (Alley, 1996).

[80] This does not require you to be an extroverted socializer — there are other ways to be an effective communicator. For introverts, however, communication likely remains an extreme sport.

[81] See Shneiderman (2002).

[82] What is pushed commercially and shared online, especially when it comes to productivity and creativity, is often what is easy to design, marketable, scales well, is visually appealing, and easy to sell. The false assumption is usually that everyone shares the same cognitive architecture. If you are not that type, the «*solution*» fails, you blame yourself, and the industry profits from selling more systems to fix problems you never had. See also the supplemental materials.

[83] Digital and analog tools have different strengths and weaknesses. What is better suited depends on the individual and the task, and it is often a false dichotomy as they often complement each other very well (hybrid solutions). For example, using a smartphone to digitize analog sketches.

[84] Known as the «*ghetto tax*», or for a striking example, the «*Captain Samuel Vimes ‹Boots› theory of socio-economic unfairness*»:

«The reason that the rich were so rich, Vimes reasoned, was because they managed to spend less money.

Take boots, for example. He earned thirty-eight dollars a month plus allowances. A really good pair of leather boots cost fifty dollars. But an affordable pair of boots, which were sort of OK for a season or two and then leaked like hell when the cardboard gave out, cost about ten dollars. Those were the kind of boots Vimes always bought and wore until the soles were so thin that he could tell where he was in Ankh-Morpork on a foggy night by the feel of the cobbles.

But the thing was that good boots lasted for years and years. A man who could afford fifty dollars had a pair of boots that'd still be keeping his feet dry in ten years' time, while a poor man who could only afford cheap boots would have spent a hundred dollars on boots in the same time and would still have wet feet.

This was the Captain Samuel Vimes 'Boots' theory of socio-economic unfairness.»

«Men at Arms» by Terry Pratchett (1993)

[85] One reason why expensive tools are not necessarily better, especially if the price tag makes them hard to replace. You might not take an expensive camera to the beach, which results in losing out on interesting photos. Similarly, a pristine paper notebook can intimidate compared to a cheap tear-off notepad.

[86] Beautifully put by Neil Gaiman's Sandman: «*Tools, of course, can be the subtlest of traps. One day, I know, I must smash the emerald.*»

[87] This is true even in more free-spirited creative domains. Some poets write down daily impressions, events, and espe-

cially feelings on index cards or in notebooks, treating these caches of experience as raw material for later work. Painters likewise collect clippings and other sources of stimulation and inspiration. *Csikszentmihalyi (1996).*

[88] Based on Wallas (1926; see also Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

[89] grok = «*to understand thoroughly and intuitively*» (a term invented by Heinlein, 1989)

[90] It depends on the person how that contact goes. Some become very adamant that their ideas work, people are just too ignorant to implement them. Others become disappointed and stop generating ideas. The issue is a simple underflow — the foundation is insufficient. Fixing the gap in knowledge would work, e.g., through learning or collaboration. After all, the desire is there, the craft is missing.

[91] Squelchers and killer phrases are sentences that can be used to discard any idea, irrespective of the characteristics of the idea. For example, «*That will never work.*», «*We've always done it that way.*», «*Don't rock the boat!*», «*That's not my job!*» or «*Too risky!*». They can also occur as thoughts you have. In contrast with useful «*how do I make the idea work*» thoughts or objections, these squelchers make a judgment (e.g., «*doesn't work*») without providing arguments or evidence. And they are not interested in making the idea work — just to stop it.

[92] As an analogy, that is akin to walking through a labyrinth — you might get closer to the exit, but until the last turn, you don't know that you do. That is why the insight experience is so surprising, you cannot see the solution coming until you have done it (cf. Anderson, 2013).

[93] For example, customers might tell you they want a more efficient communication application, when what they actually need is a redesigned process that makes this communication superfluous.

[94] Parts of the ideation section were sharpened through extended analytical dialogue with AI tools. The final structure, selection, and integration are my own.

[95] For example, jazz improvisation, deep philosophical conversations, two co-writers who «*finish each other's sentences*», paired problem solving, or lovers who share silence that feels intelligent rather than empty. Speech can be present, but it is not the generator — state alignment is — and speech enforces this state.

[96] There is a strong bias, especially in organizations, toward group «*creativity workshops*» built around verbal participation and facilitation. These can be useful for externalization or constrained exploration, but they are often mistaken for ideation itself. In practice, they may produce visibility, fragments, and social alignment more reliably than genuinely strong ideas.

[97] I designed the cover during the early writing process, but after I knew that I would be able to write the book, having written multiple books before. And I invested only a limited amount of time when I was too tired for serious writing.

[98] Cited via Duke (2022).

[99] For example, you might run into wicked (hard to define, resistant to resolution), anchor (prevent movement), and gravity problems (facts of life, have to build around; see Burnett & Evans, 2016). Functional fixedness, false dichotomies, and being misled by analogies are common failure modes (see the supplemental materials, esp. Creativity Methods).

[100] Greenberg, Carpendale, Marquardt, & Buxton (2012).

[101] If bad ideas were deliberately created, it would be clear to everyone, including yourself, that bad ideas are acceptable only as deliberately produced bad ideas. As straw men, so to speak. But that means that there is no force behind these ideas, they are not made to bear improvement, nor meant

seriously. Thus, nothing good can be built upon them. In contrast, an idea that seems crazy but it might work, or seems interesting at first glance but is actually pretty bad, and that can be stated or thought without negative reaction opens up the design space to more remote regions.

[102] Aristotle's «*It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.*» applies here as well.

[103] Greenberg, Carpendale, Marquardt, & Buxton (2012).

[104] Csikszentmihalyi (1996).

[105] Deanna Kuhn's work on epistemological beliefs is interesting here — especially regarding the differentiation between the physical world, social world, values, aesthetics, and personal taste (e.g., Kuhn, Cheney, & Weinstock, 2000).

[106] Having an idea before sleeping and thinking «*I'll remember it in the morning.*» is the classic example.

[107] Inspired by the Fogg Behavior Model (e.g., Fogg, 2009), which addresses habit change and postulates that **Behavior = Motivation × Ability × Prompt**. Motivation and Ability compensate for each other. If a behavior is hard to do, you need a lot of motivation, and if motivation is low, you will not do it. If the behavior is easy, lower levels of motivation are sufficient. The prompt is what reminds you to do the behavior. In idea capture, having the idea itself is the prompt.

[108] For example, using voice-to-text software to turn audio notes into text files.

[109] While there are some strikingly beautiful fountain pens, they usually have caps, either screw-caps or snap-caps. This makes them much slower and usually requires both hands to use them. They are also more fragile. Thus, in terms of speed, nothing beats a simple click pen.

[110] Including fictional examples. In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the Abbé Faria, confined without normal writing

tools, improvises substitutes for paper, pen, and ink in order to continue writing. When capture matters, people often find ways to externalize ideas with whatever is available.

[111] A concept by Luhmann.

[112] A clear naming scheme for files is still recommended, e.g., a description and a date such as «Populous 2024-06-02.jpg». It allows direct searching for media files, the file date does not change accidentally, and you can see what interested you at a particular time.

[113] Software becoming unavailable is not rare. Companies fold, especially small ones. If the file format is proprietary and export or conversion to a common format is not supported, access is lost. Continued use may be possible only as long as your current device and operating system remain supported. If the machine dies or the software no longer runs on a replacement system, **access is gone**. The strong recommendation is therefore to use digital solutions that let you control your data and move it quickly and easily to another app.

[114] A beautiful example is an anecdote about *El Laberinto del Fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*, 2006). Guillermo del Toro reportedly left years of notes and drawings for the film in a taxi. The driver recognized their importance and returned them at considerable effort. Had the notebook been lost, a crucial part of the project would have disappeared with it.

[115] For example, you collected ideas for a story, reached critical mass, want to write it, and turn a very long page into separate pages to begin focused ideation. Or you put them into a dedicated collection that allows much faster access to relevant entries.

[116] Though there is something to be said for having one's important documents always with you. Beautifully put in «*The Cat Who Walks Through Walls*» by Robert A. Heinlein: «*Having dumped ninety percent of my packing onto Gwen I tackled the hardest ten percent: my business records*

and files. Writers are pack rats, mostly, whereas professional military learn to travel light, again mostly. This dichotomy could have made me schizoid were it not for the most wonderful invention for writers since the eraser on the end of a pencil: electronic files. ... I now had all the files necessary to my business: contracts, business letters, file copies of my copyrighted works, general correspondence, address files, notes for stories to be written, tax records, et cetera, and so forth, ad nauseam.»

[117] For example, due to injury (e.g., in singing or dancing), changing conditions (e.g., no open positions), or simply limits of one's abilities (e.g., competition is much better).

[118] As Mr. Spock put it in Star Trek TOS: «*Having is not so pleasing a thing as wanting, it may not be logical but it is often true.*»

[119] Burnett & Evans (2016).

[120] Depending on the domain and the field, money can be one signal that is often informative, though not always decisive. There are domains and fields in which it does not work — e.g., intimate relationships — but in others it can be quite truthful. Beautifully put in «*Magic Inc.*» by Robert A. Heinlein: «*Why do some people act as if making money offended their delicate minds? I am out for a legitimate profit, and not ashamed of it; the fact that people will pay money for my goods and services shows that my work is useful.*»

[121] Practice might sound strange, but it emphasizes ongoing, lived enactment rather than task completion or box-ticking. That fits very well to aspiration.

[122] Akin to Schroeder's (Peanuts) «*The joy is in the playing.*»

[123] Even Isaac Asimov's «*If the doctor told me I had six minutes to live, I'd type a little faster.*» only gets you so far.

[124] Beautifully put by William James: «*I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest. Not that I would not, if I could, be ... a great athlete and make a million a year, be a wit, a bon-vivant and a lady killer, as well as a philosopher, a philanthropist ... and saint. But the thing is simply impossible. The millionaire's work would run counter to the saint's; the bon-vivant and the philanthropist would trip each other up; the philosopher and the lady killer could not well keep house in the same tenement of clay. Such different characters may conceivably, at the outset of life, be alike possible for a man. But to make any one of the actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed. So the seeker of truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully and pick out one on which to stake his salvation. All other selves thereupon become unreal, but the fortunes of this self are real. Its failures are real failures, its triumphs real triumphs carrying shame and gladness with them.*»

[125] This is different from project segmentation in Creative Energy. It is on the creative direction level and determines which projects are considered with which scope in the first place.

[126] Deliberately not included here are archived ideas and projects, e.g., finished projects or ideas moved into cold storage. Because they are not in the active part of the idea collection — not included in searches and the like — they do not compete for attention and energy.

[127] This requires a long-term view of creative productivity, which includes adhering to breaks and break days.

[128] However, some hard but solvable problems require the determination that comes from starting without knowing whether they can be solved («*I didn't know it was impossible when I did it.*»). It is akin to jumping into a pit to see whether

you can get out again. However, the risk of failure and wasted resources is high — you might bury yourself alive.

[129] This is a serious problem and can torpedo progress on the core project. On the plus side, even if side projects have to be reined in at times, some nice work can still be created while working on a core project for a long time.

[130] You are currently reading it.

[131] Realistically, if you are reading this book — especially this footnote — your standards will likely tend to be too high, possibly toward perfectionism. Ethical craftsmanship covers a wide range from good to excellent work. Producing very good work allows you to finish projects — more quickly or at all — and get feedback that improves future work.

[132] Including this book. It took far longer than expected, despite a private sabbatical to work on it full-time.

[133] Money is often a strong signal for value. People may say they like something, but if they spend their own hard-earned money on it, you usually know that it has value for them (excluding monopolies, social muggings, taxes, etc.). This even works in art. If you want to know which paintings are especially cherished in a museum, look at which postcards and posters are frequently restocked. Not the price of the painting itself, that is often muddled by money laundering. Sometimes the money is spent indirectly, e.g., when people travel far — at real cost — to see certain works of art.

[134] Established examples include the IBM (2018) Prioritization Grid, which uses the axes Feasibility × Value.

[135] Burnett & Evans (2016).

[136] Failing to solve the hard problems first has threatened many bachelor's and even master's theses. For example, a student wanted to use data from a fitness tracker in his app. I asked whether he could actually access the data, and he said «*Yes.*» because he was *confident* that he could — but he had

not tested it. Once the thesis had already started, and time was running, he found out that the data could only be accessed through a proprietary app. And that app was a data island that did not allow access to the fitness data. There are ways to save such a thesis, but testing access beforehand would have prevented a great deal of unnecessary anguish. This is only one example. The same logic applies to lacking necessary knowledge or skill, lacking access to resources or to the target audience, and much more.

[137] Creative people spend a great deal of time thinking about problems and developing solutions. For them, those solutions often seem obvious because they understand how they work — after all, they came up with them. For other people, seeing how and why something works, or how it should be used, can be much harder. That gap is difficult to bridge.

[138] You can make things easier by creating for people you know, like, and have access to. That sounds trivial, but it is often ignored.

[139] Like climbing onto the 10-meter board and then climbing down again.

[140] The work may still suck for a while, but if it has a clear end, that is usually manageable.

[141] People usually learn more from bad decisions than from good ones. It still sucks. And a better project would have left you in a better position.

[142] For example, if three astronauts are trapped in a broken spaceship and you need to find a way to repair the CO_2 scrubber with what is available in the capsule, as in «*Apollo 13*».

[143] Iterative work accepts that the first version will be wrong — experience suggests that most later versions will be wrong as well, but in increasingly useful ways.

[144] A formal description of this approach is given in ISO 9241-210:2010, which defines human-centered design as an itera-

tive process involving understanding the context of use, specifying requirements, developing solutions, and evaluating them.

[145] In practice, iterations are often stopped earlier because of resource limits, especially time.

[146] A good example is the iterative development of the push-forward combat system in DOOM: «*Embracing Push Forward Combat in DOOM*» (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KQNpQD8Ayo).

[147] The romantic-evening example may seem unusual for iterative design, that is why I chose it. Iterative design works in many contexts — it is not limited to software development.

[148] People often overlook what already works when they want to change something. Things that work frictionlessly are not noticed, because they «*just work*». But changes can quickly introduce friction. Akin to Chesterton's fence: «*Don't ever take a fence down until you know why it was put up.*»

[149] Akin to how rules work. The function of a rule is not to coerce you into following it, but to make sure you have a good reason when you break it.

[150] Plagiarism and copyright are separate issues. Plagiarism means acknowledging your sources. If an idea or text is not yours, indicate that clearly. Mistakes can happen easily when the source was not preserved, e.g., in the idea collection. If that happens, you are still responsible when it is found out. Copyright remains an issue even if you cite the source, especially for figures in non-fiction books. It also affects, e.g., the fonts and images you can use. Some fonts and images can be used freely. Others — even those that came with an application — require licenses.

[151] As the saying goes, «*This too shall pass. It might pass like a kidney stone. But it will pass.*». Or as Joy Clarkson wrote on X: «*This is your gentle reminder that one time in the*

Bible⌣ Elijah was like⌣ ‹God, I'm so mad! I want to die⌣!› so God said ‹Here⌣'s some⌣ food. Why don't you have⌣ a nap?› So Elijah slept, ate⌣, & decided things weren't so bad. Never underestimate⌣ the⌣ spiritual power of a nap & a snack.»

[152] For example, during a writing project — once the outline is done, you take a break of one or two days, then read it again. You will likely see things differently, revise the outline, and only then start writing the text. And the text will likely have profited from that break.

[153] Some people, especially those who tend toward hyper-focus, feel they need to realize a project in one go. And intense hyper-focus can indeed be productive. But for projects that take more than a few days, breaks are usually unavoidable. It can help to stop thinking of the project as one uninterrupted act and instead as the expression of a more enduring commitment — much like a relationship or a longer course of training. Seen this way, the research, implementation, and revision the project requires can be distributed across longer time frames without losing its coherence.

[154] For complex projects with group work, in-depth project management may be needed (e.g., Gantt charts, deliverables, responsibilities, etc.). For most one-person creative projects, however, a lighter approach avoids unnecessary overhead. The focus must be on doing, not managing.

[155] Essentially the concept of wayfinding on a project level, with the project as the reachable version of an aspiration and the milestones as the waypoints.

[156] mise en place = putting in place, i.e. lining up everything you need in its place — allows you to focus on what matters, see also Carroll (2018).

[157] Planning fallacy is a common problem in project planning. People usually underestimate the countless frictions a project entails — things that can go wrong or cause delays (Dörner, 2015). What often helps is to remember the last similar

project and compare the planned time with the actual time it took. On the positive side, without some overestimation of one's abilities, people would not do some things at all.

[158] According to legend, Alexander solved the famous Gordian knot not by untangling it but by cutting it, thereby demonstrating a low tolerance for problems that resist resolution indefinitely.

[159] In extreme cases, a longer break or even a change of jobs may be required, e.g., when deeply misaligned with the work or the workplace.

[160] Like the old saying: «*Meditate daily for 15 minutes, unless you don't have time for it. Then meditate for 30 minutes.*»

[161] This one-page article by Schwartz (2008) explains beautifully that feeling stupid is both normal and important when you are being creative in science.

[162] See Alley (1996).

[163] Lamott (1994).

[164] That feeling of being a fraud can stem from a mismatch between one's preferred ideation modes and what the domain or field expects. In other cases, it can reflect a real mismatch between role demands and current capabilities, especially when admission or selection was shaped by criteria unrelated to merit (see Cultural Environment). However, in many cases the feeling is not warranted, and an honest exchange with others on the same level can help dispel it (e.g., other students, young artists, or PhD students).

[165] Or, put differently, evaluation is the gym for ideas. They get stronger through hard work — not because that is comfortable, but because it is not.

[166] Compare «*regression to the mean*».

[167] For example, no elaborate explanations for why something *should* have worked but did not because — supposedly, the

customers were the problem. No misreading of one's own ability, misidentification of the problem, overestimation of one's own work or of the current value of the product, avoidance of the market's verdict, or confusion of intention with execution.

[168] Well put by Richard Bradley, «*... because I was inclined to believe it, I abandoned my critical judgment. I lowered my guard. The lesson I learned: One must be most critical, in the best sense of that word, about what one is already inclined to believe.*»

[169] Beautifully put by Randy Pausch, «*When you see yourself doing something badly and nobody's bothering to tell you anymore, that's a bad place to be. You may not want to hear it, but your critics are often the ones telling you they still love you and care about you, and want to make you better.*»

[170] Note that these iterations can also take the form of sketches, simulations, or prototypes. There is no need to build different bridge designs and test them under full load just to see whether they hold. Likewise, with apps, if you do sketches, prototypes, or Wizard-of-Oz tests, they may already provide sufficient contact with reality.

[171] Behavior is usually more truthful than self-description. At this stage, asking more and more people quickly leads to diminishing returns. Doing another iteration based on the feedback and then evaluating that version usually provides more actionable feedback.

[172] Or, more socially acceptable: «*Drink your own Champagne*». The idea is that if you develop or produce something, using it yourself, if applicable, makes it easier to improve the work. However, there is a risk of overgeneralization, because the creators understand the artifact much better than the average user. It is therefore easy to overlook «*trivial*» issues. For example, engineers who developed a rotary clothes dryer included the instruction to pull the cord

at a 30° angle in order to expand the dryer. Less formally educated customers neither understood 30° nor considered it relevant, so they pulled the cord straight up, which was also the easiest way to do it — the affordance worked against the instruction. The result was that the dryer was ripped out of its socket and gravity did what gravity does. Video recordings of these accidents were needed to convince the engineers that «*pull at a 30° angle*» was not «*trivial*». As usual, changing the environment is the better solution — change the mechanism so that the pulling angle no longer matters.

[173] As Charlie Brower put it, «*A new idea is delicate. It can be killed by a sneer or a yawn; it can be stabbed to death by a quip, and worried to death by a frown on the right man's brow.*»

[174] For example, suppose you release a fitness app and the target audience exercises more. Was that due to the app? Perhaps. But perhaps it was because the weather improved, or you tested it in spring and people start to move more going into summer, or because there was a general trend toward more exercise, or because they also used something else that explains the effect. To make the justified claim that it was the app, you would need a randomized controlled trial (RCT). People would be recruited and randomly assigned either to a condition with the intervention (the fitness app, experimental group) or to one without it (usually a placebo or informational app, control group). Group sizes must be large enough to detect effects statistically, the trial must run long enough to rule out newness effects, participants must not know which group they are in, manipulation checks must be conducted, measurements must be valid, and much more. Doing RCTs correctly requires methodological and domain expertise far beyond the scope of this book.

[175] Readers from empirical disciplines, especially psychology, are probably a bit outraged now. Yes, randomized controlled trials are the only proper way to examine causal effects, and if,

for example, a fitness app is advertised with «*leads to improved health*», I would want to see that well-conducted study. But for most projects, that is simply too much — too complex, too hard to do correctly, and too costly in time and resources. You could absolutely get better data, but the effort required would often make them useless for improving the work. Unless it is for a scientific publication, *satisficing* is often enough.

[176] As Wernher von Braun put it, «*One good test is worth a thousand expert opinions.*»

[177] Professions differ strongly in their error culture. A common example is surgeons versus pilots — how likely they think they can work well while tired, and how willing they are to accept correction from others. Aviation safety is impressive here — but then again, pilots cannot simply bury their mistakes and they suffer from them as well.

[178] Or, in another context, a partner might say that she wants a «*nice*» evening, but be vague about what that actually means. Identifying the requirements — e.g., what counts as good food, quiet or action, and so on — provides guidance that can then be refined through iterations.

[179] For example, a social networking site built on attention-economy principles can shift attention and behavior toward spending more time online, weaken existing social routines by displacing face-to-face contact, create dependency as interaction becomes increasingly platform-mediated, and trigger further escalation when competitors adopt the same mechanisms.

[180] Depending on the domain, more specialized methods may be available, e.g., eye tracking, physiological measures (heart rate, skin conductivity), physical and digital traces (signs of intensive use, log files), and so on.

[181] A main problem is that language is much easier to control — people embellish, obfuscate, and lie, including for appar-

ently good reasons such as not wanting to hurt another person's feelings. There are also many things that are hard to notice and verbalize, for example which contextual factors shape behavior.

[182] Ask one person to describe what another person is doing, and you will often get *interpretations* of the behavior rather than objective *descriptions* of the behavior itself.

[183] But even combined data never speak for themselves. They were generated in a specific way. Akin to throwing a net into the ocean — where you throw it and how wide the mesh is determine what you catch. Beautiful metaphor by Sir Arthur Eddington: «*Let us suppose that an ichthyologist is exploring the life of the ocean. He casts a net into the water and brings up a fishy assortment. Surveying his catch, he proceeds in the usual manner of a scientist to systematise what it reveals. He arrives at two generalisations: (1) No sea-creature is less than two inches long. (2) All sea-creatures have gills. These are both true of his catch, and he assumes tentatively that they will remain true however often he repeats it.*»

This is not an argument against evaluation, but an argument for care in conducting evaluations and interpreting results.

[184] As a practical example, a software project in Java failed in a hospital because the IT department prohibited Java applications for security reasons. Such organizational issues are often underestimated, because they are hard to change and can affect the legitimacy of organizations.

[185] The connection between style and substance was beautifully expressed by either Stephen Fry or Christopher Hitchens, «*A true thing, badly expressed, is a lie.*»

[186] As Roger Scruton put it, when he argued for the fundamental importance of beauty: «*Beauty isn't this casual thing that you might choose to be interested in or not — just as someone might choose to be interested in chocolate or something! It is, if you like, the thing that attaches us to the*

world in the first place. It is the thing that is telling us: <You belong here.>»

[187] That beauty compels beyond rationality makes it dangerous in science and engineering, because it can distract from the ultimate evaluation standard — **reality**. In architecture, for example, beauty does not matter when it comes to statics. The building is either sound or it is not, reality will show which it is. However, beauty does influence what happens to the artifacts (e.g., graffiti, vandalism) and what the artifacts evoke in people (e.g., whether they motivate us to greatness or numb us). As someone put it, «*Once you understand that beauty motivates men to greatness ... modern architecture makes a lot more sense.*»

[188] The best time to buy a used home trainer cheaply is a few weeks after New Year.

[189] Alley (1996).

[190] As Steve Krug put it, «*Testing with one user early in the project is better than testing with 50 near the end.*»

[191] For example, Ashleigh Brilliant's «*My play was a complete success. The audience was a failure.*» or PEBKAC (problem exists between keyboard and chair). A practical example, a museum exhibition was created to explain nanotechnology, but confused most visitors about the topic. The curator's reaction: «*Great, now they understand the complexity of nanotechnology.*»

[192] A variant of Thomas Henry Huxley's «*The great tragedy of science — the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact.*»

[193] See Greene (2012) «*Mastery*».

[194] On social media, and on the internet in general, a few unstable or highly unhappy individuals can create the impression of broad consensus, especially when controversy-amplifying media pick up the issue to get clicks and views. And

some people just do not recognize when content is not meant for them, see Bean soup theory in the Glossary.

[195] One of the hardest things to learn here is that these are **not honest or even rational actors with regard to the creative work itself**. For them, the issue is often not the issue. Appearing moral by supporting the current issue is — though Ernest Hemingway's «*Being against evil doesn't make you good*» applies here. In some cases, individuals or organizations also gain status, influence, or money from escalating controversy. Institutions then try to buy temporary peace through symbolic concessions or paid appeasement, which often reinforces the pattern instead of ending it. Essentially, it is a 21st century «*Danegeld*».

[196] For example, when a campaign for a product, aimed at a health-conscious and fit target audience, sparks outrage from people who would never use that product and do not share its underlying values. Reacting with humor and standing by one's actual audience is usually a better strategy than trying to be seen as good by people whose incentives are unrelated to the product itself. The actual target audience usually appreciates it, even though they often are not vocal, as they care about the product, not the fabricated issue.

[197] The internet has made this both harder and easier. Harder because of the noise — immense amounts of content are pushed at us every second — but also easier, because the target audience can now be dispersed across the whole planet and still be reached (cf. «*The Long Tail*» by Anderson).

[198] The «*MinD-Akademie*» is the university-related part of Mensa in Germany. I am no longer a member, but I still fondly remember those presentations and the unusually curious and engaged students there.

[199] ChatGPT-5.4 Extended Thinking, 2026-04-19.

[200] The definitions were generated by ChatGPT based on the third draft of this book. I checked them and edited a few.

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